

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game
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Farewell Old Friend

We have lost a dear friend. On July 5, 2004, we lost our sweet BJ. She was 30 days shy of her 15th birthday.

Logically, we know that she had a wonderful, long, healthy life. She was swimming in our pond just a couple of days before she had her stroke. She still knew who she was, and who we were and she never let anyone forget it! She kept the younger dogs in line and kept an eagle eye on me.

Even though she had a great life and many Labradors never make it to their teens--much less to 15--it still hurts. She was a part of us for 15 years and that will never leave us. She is the reason I am addicted to Labradors and the hunt test game.

I would like to share some memories.

BJ was the first-born female of our Brooke's last litter and I selected her merely on that credential...not the best way to select a dog! She was sweet, quiet, reserved and anxious to please. She worried about doing the right thing and about pleasing me.

She had a gorgeous head and expression, although as I became more educated about the Labrador standard, I realized she was a bit long in the torso and a bit high in the rear. No matter. She was totally dedicated to me and her purpose in life was to please me.

She was a wonderful obedience dog--easy to train and worked closely, always watching me for her queues. She finished her CD in two weekends (three for three) at 13 months old. At the first show, she got the "Highest Scoring Lab in Trial" award with a 194. I know that isn't much of a score these days—where obedience competition is so intense and placement decisions come down to fractions of a point in the high 190s--but back in 1990, with a backyard-trained dog (never went to an obedience class) who had never really been anywhere other than our acreage, I was pretty impressed with her! She qualified the next day as well with a 189 (handler error!) and then we finished her title the following weekend with a 191.

Then I found out about hunt tests and training for the field and our lives were changed forever. I hooked up with a couple of people who were doing field training and I worked with BJ regularly, preparing for our first Junior Hunter test. If you have been reading my articles over the last couple of years, you have read some stories about BJ and the learning we did together.

She was the first dog I ever force-fetched and it almost killed me. It hurt me deeply to pinch her and see the confusion in her eyes. But she tried hard to understand and figured it out pretty quickly. We had it pretty much whipped, but she wouldn't pick the dumbbell off the floor unless my hand was there. I couldn't get her to understand about picking it up off the floor. I had to take a business trip and I dreaded returning to the force-fetch when I got home. However, the evening I got back, I went straight out to pick

up where we left off. I had BJ in the “heel” position and I put the dumbbell on the floor. Before I could straighten up, she had snatched it off the floor and was presenting it to me! She had been thinking too, and she figured out what I wanted. You could see the sparkle in her eyes that was punctuated by the rapidly wagging tail. That was it. We were done with force-fetch.

She wasn't the fastest dog in the field, but she was deliberate and she marked well. She even participated in one test while suffering from “cold tail.” We didn't realize what was going on until after the 6-hr drive to the test. She wanted to run, so we continued. However, it was obvious she was in pain. The most difficult was watching her swim without a working rudder! She did it though and got her pass that day.

She had a great nose. In fact, the last time we took her pheasant hunting, she put up all the birds that the other dogs couldn't root out of the heavy cover. Unfortunately, they were all hen pheasants, so she wasn't rewarded with a retrieve. That look they can give you when you don't take a shot, or you miss the shot! It's a combination of disgust and disappointment. BJ had that look down pat.

She loved socks and gloves. If I dropped a glove, she snatched it up in a second and handed it back to me. If she found socks on the floor, she had to pick those up too—clean or dirty, didn't matter. I came in one cold morning this past winter and noticed I had lost a glove. I figured I would find it in the snow that night, but no such luck. As BJ and I were making our way back to the house, I saw her out of the corner of my eye, over by the garbage cans. I started to scold her for getting into the garbage when I realized she had found my missing glove! It was on top of the garbage can, apparently where I had dropped it when I put something in the can that morning.

Speaking of her nose, there was the time I jokingly told her “hunt it up” when I had seen an opossum in the deep, January snow. A few minutes later, my husband told me to turn around. Here came BJ, possum in her mouth, proud as can be. She came to the heel position and presented me with that possum like it was a duck. Of course, the possum was just “playing possum,” so I thanked her, took it by the tail and lobbed it into the pasture.

There was that hunt test in Madison with the diving duck that eluded her and took her on quite a tracking trip. She hung in there and found that duck. When she brought it back to me, the gallery burst into applause. I was just trying not to cry and drop to my knees from the stress of it all.

There was the time we stopped at a McDonald's after a hunt test to get her a congratulations hamburger—a single, just plain. She wouldn't touch it! We discovered that she only liked Burger King! (Same here, but I didn't think a Labrador would be *that* discriminating after some of the things I had seen her eat over the years).

She always tolerated our cats, and often showed them affection. I have a photo of her in the whelping box –IN LABOR—with one of my cats sitting in the whelping box with her. That cat slept with the puppies and loved to rub and roll all over them. BJ knew that Sassafras meant her babies no harm. I even have a photo of her using Chester, our gray tiger, as a head rest.

I sometimes used her to break up cat altercations—Brooke was the champion at that task, and she taught her daughter to do the same. If it was two of our cats, get in between and slurp them both. That's enough to make them forget the feud and have to wash their faces instead. If one cat was an intruder, chase that cat out of the yard.

Scarlett was 1.5 years old when we got her. We took BJ and Scarlett pheasant hunting and watched BJ teach Scarlett how to quarter. But the most amazing part of the day was when Scarlett got into some sand burs. The burs were in between her toes and Scarlett went down into a heap, holding her feet up. What a pitiful sight! BJ went over to her and we watched in amazement as BJ picked the sand burs out of Scarlett's toes! It was so unbelievable—one of those situations where you wish you had a video camera. You could just hear the conversation: "You silly girl. Just pull them out like this and come on already!" When all the burs were removed, Scarlett got up gingerly, tried her feet and then lavished BJ with kisses. Then they resumed quartering across the field. The next time Scarlett picked up some sand burs, she picked them out herself.

Six years ago, we added a cat named Scooter Pie to the household. Scooter is obnoxious to put it lightly. He has an ornery streak and liked to pick on BJ. For example, BJ would be sitting next to me. Scooter would come up and start rubbing back and forth on her chest and front legs. Then, without warning, Scooter would throw his front paws around her, give her a nip and run off! Sometimes he would bite her in the butt too. There were a few times where she curled a lip at him, but she never hurt him.

She has had many nicknames over her lifetime—BJ bear, Queen B, Miss B and in her later years, Queen One Woof. This started when her peripheral vision began to fail. Sometimes going down a hallway was difficult for her and she would get "stranded." All of a sudden we would hear WOOF! If we didn't respond quickly enough, another WOOF! echoed through the house. It didn't take us long to learn that she wanted an escort down the hall. Then she started using the "one woof" technique any time conditions weren't to her liking. Maybe a chair was pushed back too far from the breakfast table so she couldn't walk between the chair and the wall. Maybe we were in the back of the house and she was in the front of the house and she wanted to be with us—but there was that darned hallway to contend with.

She used the "one woof" in the travel trailer if we closed the gate to her crate. Even if it wasn't latched but it was closed, she wanted it OPEN! Then she would go in her crate and nap there, but it was the insulting idea of being locked in that was too much for her senior sensibilities.

She played with all the younger dogs over the years, but she also reminded them of her alpha status—which by the way she never relinquished. The other dogs, no matter what age, would all go into the puppy crouch and then muzzle-lick BJ to garner her approval.

BJ knew how to open the chain link gates to the dog runs. If I forgot to clip the runs shut, she would let the others out and they would have a grand time in the kennel all day! I would come home and see three dogs in one run—my first clue that something wasn't right. The amusing thing was that she was very selective about who she let out—she never let out the younger, obnoxious dogs or pups!

When I was home, she had to be with me. Even if I was just going to the kitchen for a drink or down the hall to the bathroom, I had my escort. Throw in the two house cats,

and I had an entourage! She didn't follow my husband when he left the room—just me. We used to joke that she was my guardian angel and her job was to watch over me night and day.

If we were out in the yard and my husband called BJ, she would smile, wag her tail and come to me. The only time she would follow my husband's commands was when I was out of town.

When we added on to our house and our bedroom moved upstairs, we tried to keep her downstairs to sleep. She wouldn't hear of it. She had to be near me—not on the bed, but on the floor by my side of the bed. All she wanted was to be near me. She mastered climbing our open-tread, wooden stair that many human friends refuse to climb.

The night after her stroke, she told me she couldn't climb the stairs any more. Three days later, she couldn't use her rear legs any more. Happily, she didn't have a long illness and she still had most of her dignity intact. She was a proud old gal.

I have so much to thank her for—her love and devotion, her patience, her forgiveness, for making me laugh, cheering me when I cried, for sharing me with all the other critters who have passed through our lives, even the obnoxious ones like Scooter Pie! She will not be forgotten and I can thank her for inspiring me to learn more about the breed and go farther in the hunt tests. Although BJ never went beyond a CD and JH, I now have a Master Hunter and two Senior Hunters because of what BJ had shown me was possible.

Farewell, old friend.

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Photo: Brooke's BJ Bear, CD, JH
August 6, 1989 – July 5, 2004