

The Greatest of These is Love.

By Pam Stuart

Life. It's been said that life is what happens to you while you're making plans. If you're familiar with the sport of agility, life is like running an agility course: you have a start line at the beginning and a finish line at the end, and lots of obstacles in between. Sometimes there are challenges - wrong courses and dropped bars - but you and your dog run the course together and there is always praise and joy because you tried. You may not have a perfect run, you may not have earned a "Q", but you and your best friend run together, do as well as you can, and live and love in that moment.

Life. In times of strife, those challenges - those wrong courses and dropped bars - become the defining moments in which we find our strengths and our capabilities. Those moments test our mettle: our courage, our fortitude, and our resolve.

It is a great test for us when our beloved dog, our best friend and our heart on four legs, is diagnosed with a serious illness. Shock. Sadness. Denial. Reality. How did this happen and why? If we had the answers, oh, if we had the answers.

It's always been Darcy and Bart. For years. I can't remember how or when we met, but it has always been Darcy and Bart. Darcy is a friend of immeasurable love, kindness, and strength - strength that was tested when she and Bart, her Vizsla started on their journey.

It began with a limp. It was early in 2008, during hunt and field season. It was just a sports related injury. Bart was only three years old; a strong, young dog from a well-planned breeding who had already finished his show championship at two and a half years of age. He ran marathons with Darcy, his longest at 16 miles. He was on his way to great success in the field as nothing was slowing him down. Not even this limp.

Dogs have their way of communicating with us. We know. We know our dogs and we just know. Is it a look? Is it intuition? Whatever it is, it is. One June morning, Bart came out of his crate, looked up at Darcy and they went to the vet.

The doctor found a lump on the top of the left shoulder and x-rays were ordered. The x-rays revealed that 80% of the scapula had been eaten away by cancer. Thankfully, Bart was young and in peak physical condition which may have prevented further injury. Without hesitation, Darcy looked at the vet and asked how quickly Bart's leg could be removed.

After a biopsy confirmed osteosarcoma, Bart underwent a full scapulectomy. The surgery was a success as the doctor was able to get clean margins.

How could this happen to such a sweet, young dog? And why? Everything about Bart was not about cancer. Everything about osteosarcoma was bleak: the statistics, the poor prognoses, the dismal outcomes. Again, why?

When word went out through the Vizsla grapevine of Darcy and Bart's plight, I remember the sinking feeling of knowing osteosarcoma and all that this diagnosis meant. I asked Darcy how she found the strength. Her answer was simple:

Love. When he was first diagnosed, I kept asking myself why were we going through this and twice I saw the word LOVE, in bright, luminescent letters, across my inside. When I saw it for the second time, I gave in and took a leap of faith that this was going to be a journey of LOVE and that has been my strength in so many different capacities – love of Bart, love from friends, love from strangers, love of this journey. It has been the best worst thing that has ever happened to me. Thankfully, there is an endless supply of love, so I feel we are prepared to keep on keepin' on for as long as we need to.

Friends came together in the name of love, as true friends do. Bart's breeder became the Research and Development Department, attending vet appointments, taking notes, supporting her friend through this maze of science, medicine and spirituality. A TeamBarty Yahoo group sprang up so everyone could be kept up to date on the latest developments through photos and shared stories. Darcy put it best: "Friends became family, and strangers became friends."

TeamBarty gained traction and folks began to send items for the fund-raising yard sales, financial support, emotional support, prayers, toys and treats. Cards and letters from across the country started appearing in the mail box, often from strangers offering their sympathy, love and support.

When Bart came home from surgery, Darcy's first priority was to try to get back to a sense of normalcy and Bart was all for that. They would take their morning walks, at first only to the end of the driveway. The end of the driveway extended to the neighbor's yard, then further on to down the street. Walks became runs. A milestone was reached when a run included an easy jump over a low retaining wall. Barty was back.

A Vizsla is a hunting dog and hunting was deep in Bart's genes. In October, 2008, as a tripaw four months after his amputation and three weeks after completing his chemotherapy, Bart earned the fourth and final leg towards his Senior Hunter title for pointing breeds. For those not familiar with pointing breed hunt and field titles, to qualify for the SH title, the dog must run and hunt birds for 30 minutes, find, point and retrieve to the AKC's exacting standards. Many dogs don't get that far on four legs. Bart did it in grand style on three.

Darcy and Bart went even further and began competing for the Master Hunter title. There were times during their hunt tests when judges would have a sympathetic look for that poor girl and her three legged dog. Sympathy changed to awe as many grown men and women, often with tears in their eyes, were so moved by the courage and determination of the beautiful spirit in that beautiful dog. And Bart did earn that Master Hunter title, ten months after his amputation. Bart is the first Vizsla in history to have completed the Master Hunter title, start to finish, on three legs.

Darcy and Bart have soldiered on, continuing their journey together in living life and performing in the field. They have also participated in the Vizsla Club of America All-Star review which honors Vizslas that have earned both their conformation championship along with one of the highest hunt or field titles.

The ribbons, the titles, the accolades, that's all a bonus. Darcy and Bart have already won the real prize. They have lived, loved and grown through this journey that continues still. In the summer of 2010, Darcy and Bart were invited to visit with the Wounded Warriors in Ft. Campbell, Kentucky. Later that fall, the Wounded Warriors came to Atlanta over Thanksgiving weekend and watched Bart compete

in a field trial. Most recently, in January 2013, Bart, nearing his eighth birthday, ran fast and hard during a guided hunt with the Wounded Warriors, inspiring soldiers returning home who are overcoming their own battle scars. Bart leads by example. He is thriving; never giving up and living life to the fullest.

Love. In bright, luminescent letters. When she saw it for the second time, she gave in and took a leap of faith that this was going to be a journey of love. Faith, hope and love abide, these three; but the greatest of these is love.

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