

JOCKO

“...Keep the big stinky dog away from me!”

by Debbie Sugarman

At first I didn't even want him. Well-meaning and concerned family members handed me this furry little Golden bundle, a “replacement” gift for the beautiful five-year-old Golden Retriever we had lost to a hit-and-run driver just 24 hours earlier. On the inside I wept for the dog I already missed so much, but on the outside I politely thanked all those who were eagerly awaiting my reaction. What I yearned to do was quietly give him back, yet, when I had to do just that 16 years later, it was the most excruciating moment of my life.

They told us his name was “Sir Jocquomo,” but that was a bit much for a puppy. We shortened it to “Jocko.” I still missed Shiloh so much, but this new puppy was a force to be reckoned with! He was determined to worm his way into my heart and, in the beginning, I found this annoying and intrusive. He would position his little silky body by my feet wherever I was. Sometimes when I was driving in the car, he would hop off the seat and lie comfortably by my ankles. It soon became a feeling I grew familiar with, and later, accustomed to. By the time he became too large to fit into that snug little space on the floorboard, I really missed having him there.

Our one-year-old son, Maury, didn't have much to do with Jocko at first. Jocko soon towered over him and Maury found Jocko's youthful playfulness intimidating. As they both grew older I kept envisioning a “Timmy and Lassie” bond, but it just didn't seem like it was going to happen. When I tried to encourage this relationship, Maury would just wrinkle his nose, point to Jocko, and say, “Keep the big stinky dog away from me!”

The months passed by and the bonds just didn't form too strongly. It wasn't until an incident happened when Jocko was six months old that I realized how much he had worked his way into my life.

One morning I was getting ready to take Jocko out for his walk. It was a pleasant sunny day and I felt we would both enjoy the fresh air. When I clapped my hands for him to come, there was very little response. I got a little closer and saw that, while his face looked eager, his body was just

not responding to the command. I clapped my hands again, and this time I noticed that he was struggling fiercely to move. It was as though the commands his brain was sending out were not being received by his limp body.

After much testing we found that Jocko was afflicted by a rare disease that affects the bones of puppies. He was almost completely paralyzed. His frustration was obvious; he wanted to bounce around the apartment, but was restricted by his uncooperative little body. My husband, Dave, and I took turns carrying him down the steps from our second-floor apartment to let him lay on the grass outside. It was then that I began to miss his youthful perkiness and came to realize that he was becoming more than just a replacement for the dog we had lost earlier that year. I started to really pray for his recovery. One morning, less than a week later, he bounded over to greet me. It was as though nothing had been wrong with him. He remained free of the disease for the rest of his life.

As the weeks passed Jocko went everywhere with us. I'm not sure when Jocko became a family member; all I do know is that he became an integral part of each day.

When Jock was eight months old, we moved to our own home. There was much more room for him to play. As the years moved on we added two more children to our household, Kelly Brooke and Kimberly Jill. Jocko was always there for them, constantly amusing and entertaining. Kim would giggle when he licked her tiny face. Most of our photographs from those days included the three children and, of course, Jocko. He was there throughout their childhood as loving companion and fierce protector.

Through those wonderful years, whenever I think of Jocko, I picture his playful antics. Much of the time he held a tennis ball in his mouth or between his paws. He particularly enjoyed running down the hill to fetch his ball, coming back up to hold it, and teasing those who would try to remove it for another throw. It was then that he would first place one paw over it and then another if the person became too insistent on taking it. He would slowly remove his paws from the ball, but as soon as he sensed that the

tug-of-war was about to begin again...*wham!*...both paws would resume position as he waited eagerly.

My fondest memories are of Jocko in the snow. He loved the snow and would romp tirelessly around in it for hours. The children would throw snowballs and he would watch them break apart in his mouth as he caught them. His deep golden color was such a beautiful contrast to the clean white snow. As the children took turns sliding down the hill, he would be a few steps behind, barking excitedly.

It was sometimes in his nature to wander off. Though we took many precautions to assure his safety, there were those rare occasions when one of the children's friends would forget to close the courtyard gate. Jocko—being the neighborhood Don Juan—would seize the opportunity. Those hours spent searching for him were pure agony for the entire family. Even Kim and Kelly would take their megaphones and stand outside of the house calling for Jock. Dave and I, each in separate cars, would sometimes pass each other on the road, each

of us shaking our head no in a silent code. We would search every square inch of our neighborhood yet, just as quietly as he'd disappeared, he would suddenly reappear. Usually he was soaked from a recent visit to the stream in the backyard, and he had a satisfied look on his face. No remorse there! I was so filled with relief that I would just hug him endlessly.

Throughout his life that would be his pattern. Perhaps once a year he would mysteriously disappear and then quietly return. One time this was not to be the case. As the hours stretched into days, I tried to submerge the panic that was threatening to consume me. The children designed "missing" posters and we quickly distributed them to the surrounding neighborhoods. It was difficult to go about our daily routines. I only hoped that Jocko had the good sense to stay away from the train that frequented our neighborhood twice daily.

Then, on a cold night about five days after he departed, I thought I heard a faint noise outside the front door. There he was, a wet, thin and weakened shadow of his former self. I practically carried him into the house. By the time we got him to the vet we were told that he was in shock and would need immediate surgery. According to the veterinarian it appeared as though Jocko had been hit by a car. His flowing golden tail would have to be amputated—that beautiful tail which had always indicated how happy he was with life. But, if amputation would save his life, we

had no choice. I quietly explained to my four-year-old son that while Jocko would look different, we would still love him just the same. Being the compassionate child that he was Maury, who by this time was now Jocko's best friend, quietly agreed. The decision was made. It was a Sunday evening and surgery was scheduled for Monday morning.

At the last minute Dave decided to get a second opinion. He asked a high school buddy, Allan Frank, who was also a veterinarian, to run over to the clinic and to see what he thought. He determined that surgery was unnecessary. Afraid that he would not be able to communicate this to the surgeon before he arrived at the clinic, Dave made a huge "Do NOT amputate Jocko's tail!!" sign and taped it to the front door of the clinic.

Well, Jocko was spared and Maury was relieved that his special dog would not have to go around with a bobbed tail for the rest of his days. We switched over to Allan Frank as our veterinarian; it was the beginning of a wonderful relationship that would continue for

many years. Perhaps

Jocko sensed what a life-saver Allan had been because, whenever he went in for a checkup, he would more than willingly hop up onto the examining table. Jock's enthusiasm for his checkup was always amusing to Allan and me.

The years passed by, the children grew and Jocko grew right

along with them. He was a part of everything they did, even part of most of our family vacations. Jocko loved to hike and camp and continued to do so right up to the very end.

Jocko was a playful yet dignified dog. Even so, he did have his silly moments. When the children were little there was a cartoon called "Muppet Babies." Sometimes I would sing the theme song to them when the show came on television. One time, while I was singing, Jocko began bouncing around as though he was trying to dance. That song quickly became Jocko's song, and many years later, when he mostly slept, I could still get him to perk up just by singing "Muppet Babies" to him.

By the time Jocko was 10 years old, it became apparent that he might not be with us for many more years. Large dogs don't usually live more than twelve or thirteen years. Our vet had never seen a Golden Retriever live longer than fourteen years. We began to look into mating Jock so we would have one of his puppies as a legacy. It turned out that it was too much of a strain on his aging body. We resigned ourselves to the fact that we would never have



one of his puppies.

Well, something wonderful happened unexpectedly a few months later. We were making our usual trip to visit the cute puppies at the pet store in the mall. The next thing I knew we were walking out with an adorable Cocker Spaniel puppy. This was the first time we had ever purchased a dog from a pet store so we were somewhat concerned about what type of disposition he would have. It turned out that we had nothing to worry about for our new puppy, Homer, adopted the sweet and pleasant temperament of his buddy, Jocko.

At first Jocko was curious about Homer and kept peeking into Homer's box. Then, as the days went by, he appeared to completely detach himself from the puppy. Homer, completely unaware of Jocko's disinterest, devoted his time to becoming Jocko's shadow. He was always one step behind his big new friend. If I threw a ball for Jocko, Homer would run down the hill right behind him. His short little legs would take three times as many steps to reach their destination, but Homer's energy was limitless.

Jocko always liked to relax on the cold tile in the front hall. From there he could position himself to look out the front window. The sun would always shine through that window, and Jock would try to catch those rays across his golden face. Whenever Jock would lie down, Homer would place himself so that some part of his body would be nestled into Jocko. Sometimes he would lay his head right across Jock's stomach as though it was his own personal bed! Jock was a patient fellow and never seemed to mind.

One morning I walked into my bedroom and was terrified by what I saw there! Jocko, who had tolerated Homer, but had never initiated contact with him, was flipped over on his back with Homer between his paws. Not only that, but my little puppy's head was directly in Jocko's mouth. I was afraid that jealousy had finally settled in! But it turned out that my "gentle giant" was only playing with his new friend. Homer had rejuvenated Jock, and it was the beginning of many interactions between the two of them in the years to come.

As the years rolled by I barely noticed that Jocko was aging. His golden face was turning gray, as was that splendid tail we once thought would never wag again. His eyes were developing cataracts and his hearing was starting to fail. Yet he never complained and, even at age 15, he still continued to enjoy life's simple pleasures.

He did sleep more. Jocko enjoyed lying down in the big, furry brown dog bed which we kept near the fireplace in our bedroom. He basked in the warmth of our winter fires. Often I would take my place next to him on the floor and fill his ears with words of love and heartfelt devotion. I knew his time was winding down; each day was a fine gift to me. I tried to imagine what it would be like without him, but the image was too painful to sustain.

As the months went by and movement became more difficult for him, we all sought ways to make Jocko's life easier. Dave would carry him up the stairs each night, and I would add blankets to his bed to make it even softer. The children were constantly by his side. Kelly, Kim, and Maury could feel the inevitable and were making the most of their quality time with him. Kim would often bring in her sleeping bag and lay on the floor next to his dog bed. I would hear her speak softly to him; often I would find her

sound asleep in that same position the next morning.

Jock's back legs were really starting to give him problems. Since the tile on the hallway floor was also very slippery, we covered it with more rugs so he would still be able to lie on it. He never moved much from that spot during the day, but we would often visit him there and rub that favorite spot of his under his neck. He would appear oblivious but, as soon as you stopped, he would nuzzle your hand for more.

Our last New Year's Eve with Jocko was just like so many which had preceded it. Dave and I liked to spend the holiday with our family. We would cook a meal together, start a fire, and just spend a quiet evening with the children. Jocko was always a part of this scenario. I took so many photos of Jock that last year, as though pictures could sustain me through my impending grief. New Year's Eve was no exception; I must have taken three rolls of film that night. In all of the photographs Jocko was surrounded by confetti, once again a key player in a family celebration.

A month later we took Jocko to the beach, an annual winter outing that he truly loved. He was allowed to roam the beach in the winter with no repercussions from the beach patrol. Jocko and Homer trotted along, though now it was Homer who was always a few steps ahead. However, Jocko would always perk up and sometimes even romp a little when he spotted another Golden Retriever. It was the same playfulness he reserved for me when we'd been apart for a while. It gave me hope that perhaps Jocko had more months ahead of him. Sadly this was not to be.

On an April afternoon we took him to some land we had purchased out in the country—a place he loved to visit. We had hopes of building a log home there in the near future. With the sun on his face, he led the group as we hiked down the familiar dirt path through the woods. Every time there was a dip in the path Jocko's back legs would give way and he would need help getting back up again. Maury quietly stayed directly behind Jock, holding him up and serving as his back legs. With Maury's aid Jocko was even able to maintain the lead position. We didn't know then that it was to be his last hike.

Less than a week later the children had Jocko out for a walk near the house. They came running in to tell me that Jocko's legs had completely collapsed from under him. We lifted him into the car and quickly drove him to Dr. Frank. Though it was near closing time, Allan devoted hours to Jocko's care. He ran several tests and determined that there appeared to be some internal bleeding. Through all of this Jocko lay patiently on the examining table as we showered him with caresses and loving words. The purple I band around his paw gave him the appearance of an athlete, a contradiction to the compromised and weakened position his body was in. He seemed to respond to the intravenous fluids, giving me hope that this had been a false alarm and all would be right again.

As a precaution Allan suggested that we take Jocko to the emergency clinic for the night where they would carefully monitor his vital signs. We drove him there and found a very caring veterinarian, Dr. Gernhart, awaiting our arrival. She carefully explained how she would be looking for signs of continued internal bleeding. If she felt it would be necessary to do exploratory surgery, we would be contacted during the night.

I was so restless that I spent the next three hours doing chores around the house. I finally fell asleep at 1 a.m. Two hours later I received the phone call. Jocko's condition had deteriorated rapidly. If emergency surgery was not performed immediately, he might not make it through the night. Anticipating the worst I kept saying to Dave, "I'm not ready to let him go." Dave asked if I would ever be ready to say goodbye. We both knew the answer to that.

I rounded up the kids and told them what was happening. After giving them the option to come to the emergency clinic or remain home, they unanimously decided to come along. We quickly arrived at the clinic. While the doctor was preparing for the surgery we had 20 precious minutes to lie on the floor with Jocko. We all spoke of our great love for him. We each carried the silent thought that these might be our last words to our beloved friend. We showered him with kisses. Maury was the last to say goodbye and I heard him lovingly whisper, "You're not a big stinky dog any more."

The time in the waiting room went by very slowly. We passed it telling stories about Jocko. Each of us was silently hopeful that, like any of the other difficult times in his life, he would walk away from this unscathed.

At five-thirty in the morning a tearful Dr. Gernhart came to us and said that Jocko' was filled with cancerous tumors. There was a great deal of internal bleeding. She suggested that we put him to sleep. I had always hoped that when Jocko's time was up, he would not have to suffer. The thought of his frail body having to deal with cancer was too much to bear. He had been happy up to the end. We

all looked at each other, cried, and nodded in agreement. The decision was made.

When we went home in the early morning hours, I felt so numb. Such a large part of my life was now missing. The sun was just starting to come up over the hill and I felt this intense desire to run to the top of the hill and embrace it. I felt as though my beautiful Golden boy was a part of that glorious golden sunrise.

A few hours later we put Jocko's lifeless body into a white wooden box. On the outside of the box I wrote his name, the dates of his birth and his death, and of the incredible love we felt for him. My mind quickly played flashbacks of our life together, from his exuberant puppy days, to his days as my "little old man."

We drove out to the country, to the same place he had hiked just a few short days before. Dave dug a grave at a beautiful spot under some shade trees near the brook that Jocko loved to explore. Each of us said some kind words about our dear old Jock and I once again expressed gratitude that he had been happy right up to the end. Later we planted beautiful flowers on top of the grave. That was six years ago, yes, even to this day I think of Jock whenever I see a magnificent sunrise. We now have our log home, about thirty yards from where Jocko lies. It gives me great solace to sit nearby, listen to the water in the brook and watch the towering trees as they sway in the breeze. I may not be able to touch him again or stroke his lovely golden fur, but I will feel him with me always. ❖

The ERB chairman has determined that this article does not require review.