

The Healing Power of a Loving Dog

by C. John Stanchina

We think Sam came into this world sometime in 1998. Found as a street dog in London, he quickly made his way to a local shelter and into the arms of Susan, his adoptive Mom. Serving on an overseas assignment for a US advertising agency, Susan frequently found herself missing her friends and family and lamenting the cool, cloudy, rainy, London weather. Her most consistent bright spot throughout her time abroad was Sam. Whether it was his exuberance when she returned home at the end of a long day, or the snuggly, unwavering companionship he provided on so many of their damp, dreary days together in their Highgate flat, Sam's faithful affection made it all livable.



Susan & Sam in their Highgate flat, April 2001

In the spring of 2001, Sam followed his Mom west, across the pond, to Minneapolis. A long-time friend of my family, Susan became the first person to "choose" me, following my crippling skiing accident in January of 2000. Unfortunately, as events of the ensuing months revealed, I was not yet at a place in my recovery where I could serve as an equally productive partner in a committed relationship. After three months of sharing my townhome with me, Susan and Sam moved to their own place, setting the stage for one of the most important phases of my recovery.

Over the next six months, I lived entirely on my own in the townhouse I enjoyed so much in the years preceding my injury. I was free to privately celebrate my little successes and vehemently curse my failures of all sizes. In retrospect, this time living alone facilitated the biggest "step" I took in accepting my new reality and deciding to try to live as best I could with my disability.

It was also during this time that Susan and I officially "broke up," and grew back together, albeit ultimately in the context of being really, really good friends. Realizing that Minneapolis did not hold the promise Susan had originally envisioned, she asked if she and Sam could move back to my place with the understanding that she would soon be returning to southeastern Michigan to be closer to her immediate family and to pursue a PhD.

Part of Susan's preparation for moving back in with me included contacting the dog walker she had previously used when she, Sam and I lived together. Emboldened by my growing sense of self and self-confidence, I suggested that I would be willing to try to accommodate Sam's need for exercise and stimulation.

Being a Jack Russell Terrier and either Border Collie or English Springer Spaniel mix, Sam was naturally active and bright and needed an outlet for all of his energy. Being a former bike racer, ski instructor and in-line speed skater as well as a soon-to-be airline pilot, I too needed regular exercise and stimulation. It seemed like Sam's need for walks and my need for a fitness maintenance plan were a natural fit.

I figured the key to my being able to walk Sam from my wheelchair was rooted in the concept of mounting a leash high above me so Sam could pull it in any direction without becoming entangled in my chair or its wheels. If done

properly, Sam would enjoy 360 degrees of tangle-free, roaming freedom and I would have both hands available for the safe operation of my chair. My initial attempt was crude, but effective. I dropped a 48-inch long, one inch diameter, wooden dowel into one of the receivers for my tubular, swing-away, aluminum arm rests. At the top of this dowel, I mounted the hardware necessary to affix a rotating mechanism that could also cradle an off-the-shelf, retractable leash. The device worked well enough at first, but had yet to stand up to any really rigorous testing.

Our first serious outing together, to a path around a local lake, schooled me on the power of instinct and the importance of materials testing. We weren't quite half way around the lake before Sam spied a pair of ducks, and promptly took off after them at full tilt. I braced for the jolt I expected when Sam ran out of leash. Instead, all I got was the "crack" of the dowel breaking off at the top of the arm rest receiver. Sam, on the other hand, didn't miss a beat, bounding into the water, dragging the remnants of the very first prototype of what would eventually become the Hound-a-bout™ hands-free dog walking system behind him.

While I can look back on that situation now with fond nostalgia, at the time of the failure I felt really defeated – as in, "How many challenges does a guy in a wheelchair need to overcome?!? Seriously!" But it was that defeat that prompted me to investigate alternative materials for the Hound-a-bout mast, which included steel broom handles, and eventually, aluminum tubing. So, although I may have learned a valuable lesson on the issue of materials testing, on the issue of the strength of Sam's hunter-killer instinct...apparently the universe felt I needed another teachable moment. More on that in just a bit.

Throughout the summer of 2002, Sam and I grew closer as we continued to bond during our daily walks together. Susan clearly saw the good Sam did for me, and in preparation for her departure, set about searching for a canine companion I could call my own once she and Sam moved back to Michigan.

Early one Sunday that July, we hit the road to meet some Jack Russell Terrier puppies. Our first encounter was pleasant, but I found myself surprisingly underwhelmed. Our second appointment was a bit more in-depth, out at a breeder's farm. After spending quite a bit of time among as many as a half dozen JRT pups, I finally found myself warming up to one. It was at this time that Susan asked the breeder if she could give us a minute alone. Susan then paused, took a deep breath, turned to me and said, "C, I know what I need to do. I need to leave you Sam."

While I heard and understood the words, I was in a state of stunned disbelief. It just couldn't be. Susan could not possibly give up Sam, the dog that got her through the lonely times in cold, rainy London; Sam, the dog that she regularly referred to as the smartest, cutest dog in the world; Sam, the dog that stood by her through thick and thin, moves and break-ups. But yes, with the selfless generosity of an organ donor, that was exactly what she was prepared to do.

As my speechlessness began to wear off, all I could manage to say was something along the lines of, "Are you serious? Are you sure? You need to think about this. You need to sleep on this. And if you should EVER change your mind, in an hour, in a day, in a week, in a month, in a year, in ten years, just say the word." I couldn't possibly keep this remarkable animal from the person who raised and cared for him since he was a puppy.

But she *was* sure. Just a few short weeks later, amid lots of tears, she packed up her car and drove back to southeast Michigan, leaving Sam solely in my care. So began one of the most rewarding periods of my life, irrespective of it's bumpy start.



Sam knew something was up as his Mom packed her car

It's "bumpy start" gets back to my earlier reference to the strength of Sam's hunter-killer instinct. It wasn't more than a week into my time as Sam's sole guardian that his instinct got the better of him, and me, once again. We were out on our evening walk around a nearby community college campus, when Sammy spotted a ground hog. Undeterred by his being tethered to me, he tore off across the field toward the furry creature at top speed. Having learned my materials testing lesson several months earlier at the lake, I just sat there and prepared for the jolt that was sure to result when Sambo ran out of available leash.

What I was unprepared for was the force that little 20-pound dog could generate when running flat out, multiplied by the leverage created by the aluminum Hound-a-bout™ mast. Rather than bringing Sam to an abrupt stop, the system helped temporarily turn my world not upside down, but sideways. Sammy's inertia was enough to tip my wheelchair over on its side, dumping me out of it, and releasing the Hound-a-bout system from its place in my chair's arm rest receiver.

Not really any worse for wear, I managed to right my chair, drag myself back into it, and collect Sam from the opening to the ground hog's den in the middle of the field. Getting through that incident with him completely on my own, right then and there, confirmed for me that I'd be able to fulfill my single canine parent role just fine.

The next several years were filled with countless walks and road trips great and small – trips as epic as a man and his dog on the open road, in a convertible, heading for the Rockies, or as casual as Sunday afternoon jaunts up to my parents' home for dinner. And thanks to Sam's loyal affection and unwavering companionship, in spite of my wading into the emotionally turbulent waters of Internet dating...from a wheelchair...so many of the days during those years proved to be among the happiest I had experienced to that point in my post-injury life.



Sam LOVED to ride in our convertible, and would often wait in it patiently for me, even with the top and the windows down

Then, one morning in August of 2007, Sam inexplicably left some of his kibble in his bowl, uneaten. Now, just to put this in perspective, our first Thanksgiving together, I watched in amazement as Sam devoured what amounted

to five percent of his total body weight in under sixty seconds. Food was his currency. For him to leave ANY behind meant something must be really, really wrong.

Several days later, after a couple of unscheduled regular vet clinic visits, an emergency vet clinic visit, and an overnight at the University of Minnesota's College of Veterinary Medicine's Small Animal Hospital, I was told that Sam was most likely suffering from B-cell lymphoma. While distressed, I was also relieved to know what we were dealing with. I was even more relieved to learn that there was a chemotherapeutic course available that would likely take Sam from near death to remission.

So began my time to care for the one who had cared so diligently for me for so many years. From September through February, we made weekly trips down to the U. Each day of chemotherapy meant four rush hour commutes for us – into the city to get Sam there by 8:00 AM; out of the city to get me to work; back into the city to pick Sam up after 3:00 PM; and back out of the city to get us home. In between those appointments, there was medication to administer, side effects to monitor and document, and no shortage of vomit and diarrhea to clean up.

Fortunately, though, after three or four weeks of chemo, Sam began to show demonstrable signs of improvement. By early November, he was well on his way to being his old self, and by Thanksgiving, no one could tell that he was anything other than happy and healthy. So in just three months, my Sam went from death's door to being every bit of the dog he ever was. I was so, so grateful. Nonetheless, we continued his prescribed course of chemotherapy, seeing it through to its conclusion in February, to maximize the staying power of Sam's remission.

The fact that Sam's chemotherapy ended in February of 2008 is noteworthy, as that was also the month that I elected to leave my medical device job of nearly thirteen years to give my full attention to Blue Zone Enterprises. So, there we were – Sam, having beaten a life threatening illness, and me, having done my part to get him through it, together...full time...to try to commercialize the Hound-a-bout hands-free dog walking system – the device inspired by Sam's need for stimulation and exercise and my need for a fitness maintenance program.



Among the last pictures taken of my sweet boy during a Thanksgiving, 2007 visit to my future in-laws; Sam is in complete remission and every bit of the dog he ever was

Unfortunately, our much deserved, crisis-free, 24/7 time together did not last all that long. In April, Sam started showing signs of what our veterinarian thought was a food allergy. By early May, a clinical investigation of symptoms of fatigue and lethargy revealed that Sam had developed a cardiac conduction condition that basically cut his heart rate in half. Toss in a seizure or two combined with a bulging right eye, and I knew his prognosis couldn't be good. Suspecting a relapse, Sam's oncology team at the U recommended trying a different chemotherapeutic protocol, and we went for it. But I don't think we were more than two weeks along when Sam's oncologist advised me that he didn't think Sam was responding as he should be. He went on to say that if we didn't see notable improvement by his next scheduled appointment two weeks later, I should be prepared to consider a very different course of action.

Sam never made it to his next appointment. On Memorial Day, 2008, Sam playfully bounded around what was to become our new home in fewer than four weeks, once Nicole and I were finally married. By the following

morning, he had slowed down significantly and showed little interest in eating. Twenty-four hours after that, he didn't or couldn't move around on his own, and stopped drinking. As Wednesdays had historically been our weeknight to head up to Plymouth to spend time with our soon-to-be family, Nicole and her Blue Persian, Thorne, I gently collected Sam and headed north according to plan.

I remember having to grill that night, and asking Nicole to keep an eye on Sam. While I was outside, Sam had another seizure and threw up. When I came back in, Nicole was tending to him, told me what had happened, and tenderly asked me if I had held him and told him that it was okay to go. That's pretty much how I spent the next couple of hours – cradling him, sobbing, telling him how much I loved him, how much I would miss him, how thankful I was for our time together, and letting him know that the rest was all up to him.

Around 10:00 PM or so, I once again gently collected my sweet, sweet boy in preparation for our return home. My soon-to-be wife did her best to comfort me and said her final goodbye to Sam. After arriving home, I got into bed and tucked Sam in next to me under my left arm. I fell asleep near midnight, Sam still breathing slowly beside me.

I awoke with a bit of a start at roughly 2:30 Thursday morning. My first instinct, of course, was to check on Sam. He had stopped breathing some time during the preceding two and a half hours.

I am certain that many who read this will say that I should have intervened earlier and done the "humane thing." To them I'd reply that my only regret is that I was not awake with my boy when he took his final breath.

And while I kind of wish he could have been there with me to cross the threshold to the next great phase of my life – my life with MY person, my wife, Nicole, I don't know how I would have been able to enjoy our wedding reception, much less go on our honeymoon, if I was preoccupied with the notion of coming home only to find that Sam had died without me being there for him. So, perhaps he knew best. Perhaps he knew his time.

So, with the exception of the enduring fond memories and the fact that he will live forever as the face of the Hound-a-bout™ system, here ends the story of Sam, the dog who single-handedly saved my quality of life.

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