

AKC Gazette breed column

February 2007

Road Trip Nightmare - Lost Dog!

Remember Vivi the Whippet, who dashed out of her crate at JFK airport a year ago and is still missing? Among all the kibble, chew toys, leashes, blankets, medicines, etc that you pack for shows and performance events, what should you take to help find a dog if it were to be lost away from home?

Precisely this - a Lost Dog Kit. You may never need it, but if you do, you will most likely need it badly. Here is how to make one.

Step 1: Create your own "Lost Dog" poster template with contact info in place but details of the dog's name, gender, color/markings, and last known location left blank. List cell phone numbers and also the home number if there is an answering machine. Leave space for a photograph or two. Offer a reward but don't specify the amount.

Step 2: Gather a couple of good pictures of your traveling dogs - preferably a stacked side shot (cropped to dog only) and a front view to better show the face. These need only be black and white and should be sized to fit the space on your poster. Show as much dog as possible - and if you don't have a good picture, illustrate your poster with a photo from a breed magazine or book (the average person will not know what a Saluki or other unusual breed looks like, much less be able to make distinctions between individuals or types).

Step 3: Keep a list of microchip and tattoo numbers, and any identifying marks or scars. Include rabies certificates, and the phone numbers of friends, relatives, and regional dog club members along the route.

Step 4: Put the poster template, photos, and pertinent information into a stout envelope and label it plainly "Lost Dog Kit." Put it in a safe place in your luggage or vehicle and let your fellow travelers know its location.

Now that you have prepared for the worst, should a dog go missing, dash to the nearest photocopy machine to make posters and flyers for immediate distribution. Imagine the precious time that would be lost if you had to call home and have a friend or breeder rummage for photos to be faxed or e-mailed to you.

For the technically minded, all this information could be brought along on CD-ROM, USB flash drive, or laptop (or even downloaded from your website) - but this adds the extra steps of getting it downloaded and printed before you can make posters. Needless to say, the kit can also be used for a lost dog search at home.

The time to learn about how to successfully search for a missing dog is before it happens, not afterwards, when strong emotions cloud the mind. To tap into over 30 years experience of finding lost dogs, take a look at John Keane's "Sherlock Bones" website <http://sherlockbones.com> for excellent ideas and resources. Louis Pasteur believed firmly that, "Fortune favors the prepared mind," and your chances of finding a dog lost on the road or at home will be greatly increased with the small amount of work needed to make a Lost Dog Kit. The peace of mind is worth the effort.

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Bringing Health Issues Out of the Shadows

"If you tell anybody that you had a dog die of a heart condition, no one will want to get puppies from you." That warning was the verbal gauntlet that started a 33-year odyssey of research on health issues to establish specific normal reference ranges for Salukis.

In 1980, veterinarian MaryDee Sist's apparently healthy, active female Saluki died suddenly and inexplicably. On post mortem examination, cardiomyopathy (heart muscle dysfunction) was diagnosed based on the heart weight compared to the body weights of mixed breed dogs. At the time, cardiologists accepted that human athletes and some conditioned dogs, such as Greyhounds, had hypertrophy (enlargement) of their hearts. Dr. Sist asked if Salukis were the same and, if so, how large of a heart could be "normal" and still allow the dog to live a normal life? More importantly - had other Saluki owners experienced similar problems? No one had the answer.

Dr. Sist took up the challenge and worked with a cardiologist who

discovered that many normal Salukis had heart abnormalities such as murmurs, irregular rates/rhythms, or enlarged hearts with lowered contractility. Owners were encouraged to share this sort of health information and research began to characterize the normal Saluki heart, and follow the subject's lifespan to see if the pathology was connected to reduced longevity. Post mortem examination of the hearts revealed that, while the incidence of sudden death due to cardiomyopathy was low, a surprising number of Salukis had died suddenly from hemangiosarcoma - a rare form of vascular system cancer that affects a specific area of the heart, as well as the skin, liver, and spleen.¹ This insight led to the creation of a Saluki Tumor Registry to collect data on the incidence of various cancers and store samples for future DNA analysis.

"We need to establish breed-specific normal reference ranges," says Dr. Sist, "The normal for a Beagle will not be the normal for a Saluki. Once we have enough data to identify what is normal, it should help explain some of the pathology we see." But it is difficult to get owners to spend money for research on healthy dogs. To make participation easier, Saluki Health Research, a non-profit 501(c)(3) corporation, was formed to fund health investigations. The venture has been successful through generous donations of funds, tissue, and blood samples (which are still needed . . .), and has established normal reference ranges for heart indices, CBC (complete blood count), and thyroid hormones (which turn out to be quite different from mixed breed normals). "I think that the most valuable thing for our breed is for people to have their Salukis examined and share the findings about medical conditions with other Saluki folks. That is the only way we can have some idea of and deal with the health issues in our breed."

Dr. Sist broke the traditional silence about health problems and despite the warning - people wanted her Saluki puppies. You can learn about her research at <http://salukihealthresearch.tripod.com> and read "Salukis with Broken Hearts" - the article that gave permission for breeders to bring health information out of the shadows, thereby helping to ensure the future well being of our breed.

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¹Hemangiosarcoma is an insidious killer as it is often asymptomatic until the tumor ruptures and the dog bleeds to death internally.

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They would do it for you

As I write this on March 9th, Oksana has been dead for one week. She was 13 years old and for the last several months had been getting increasingly frail. Since Christmas, her ability to walk had decreased markedly. Last Friday, we made the decision dreaded by all dog lovers - and our vet put the old Saluki to sleep in my arms.

Over the years, I've spent a lot of time thinking deeply about the process of dying. Even more so during the six weeks last summer that my father was dying and Oksana was getting weaker. I suspect that most of us (myself included) secretly hope that our dogs will die peacefully of old age in their sleep and relieve us of the responsibility of making the euthanasia decision. At least in our history with dogs, that has rarely happened. Watching our old friend fade or grow sicker, we would think about how to know when the moment was right. A couple of times, we delayed longer than we should have in the hopes that the dog would have just one more good day. With that delay, the dog's condition often deteriorated to a crisis of suffering or incapacitation, and we would have to call our vet late at night or on holidays, feeling doubly bad because we had not only lost our dog, but because our indecision actually caused more suffering.

So, it ultimately boils down to the dog's quality of life. For Wendy and I there are three things that we ask ourselves every day in those last stages. Is the dog in pain and if so, how much? Does the dog still eat and enjoy life? Can the dog still get around and eliminate on its own (or with some help)?

All three of these factors are shifting components in the equation. If any one becomes more of a problem, then it can outweigh any positives from the other two. Oksana was declining in all three areas and we watched carefully for signs

that hinted things were about to get bad. Every morning, it was, "Is today the day?" And if she was okay in the morning, she might be less so in the evening, and we would wonder, "Will it be tomorrow?"

In the end, I think your dog tells you when it is time . . . if you are watching for the signs. After 40 years of owning dogs, I now firmly believe that it is best to try and catch the moment on the decline before the crisis, and end on as good a day as possible.

And when that time comes, we hug the dog and talk reassuringly while the needle goes in. I know some people can't bear to be there at the end, but bringing that life into this world and clamping off its umbilical cord began many years of staunch loyalty and companionship. In return, we believe this is the last mercy we can give our old friends - to help their passing be a little easier and as free from pain as possible. As my good friend Warren Cook once said, "They would do it for you."

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"Return to Normal Function" What the Orthopedic Surgeon and Physical Therapist missed . . .

Why couldn't Ildico make a running turn after being pronounced "whole" by both surgeon and therapist? We had no idea, but it turned out, there was something that neither professional had considered.

In November 2002, I flew home from England with an 11-week-old puppy in the cabin. Just days after her arrival, young Ildico injured her right knee. Our vet thought it was a bad sprain, but when the limp persisted, an x-ray revealed that a piece of bone had been wrenched from her tibia (avulsion fracture) and with it, the attachment point for her cranial cruciate ligament (one of two that humans and dogs need to make their knees work).

Fast forward through two surgeries, seven months of close confinement, physical therapy, pampering, and angst, to the day when Ildico had "returned to normal function." She was aching to run

and we let her loose in a small yard for first time since her injury. You have never seen a happier dog (or owners) until she made a turn at speed, fell, screamed, and began limping again. We were sure the knee was damaged again, but the therapist said reassuringly that we needed to work up to free running - one element at a time - as her body became ready for it.

No one had anticipated that, unlike a normal puppy, Ildico had grown from toddler to teenager unable to learn how to use her body as it changed. So, Wendy and I would have to teach her. Twice a day, we put Ildico on a flexi-lead and let her chase a bit of fur attached to a cord at the end of a six-foot bamboo pole. Similar to lunging a horse, we worked her in circles alternating directions and speed - letting her catch the fur periodically as her reward. Over a month, we progressed to bigger circles, figure eights, and lastly, the wildest free-form maneuvers I could devise.

Finally, on July 4th (with her first birthday coming up) we judged that Ildico was ready. Wendy suggested we tire her a little with the usual circles, lest she go too crazy with her new freedom. That was just the ticket, because she tore happily around the large paddock and wore herself out in 15 minutes. We kept a cautious eye on Ildico for the next few months, allowing her to exercise freely alone and with dogs who would not be too rough as she re-learned to play tag, wrestle, and take tumbles. It took more months for her to develop normal stamina and muscle tone. In June of the following year, we let her lure course for the first time and she tore after the plastic bag like a ricocheting bullet. In the show ring, her rear gait was, and is, flawless, and apart from a long scar inside of her right leg, you'd never know there had been anything wrong with her knee.

That is not all of Ildico's story, but my point here is that an informed owner often knows more about breed-specific normal than the professionals who treat all breeds - and with a leg injury in dogs whose life is running, "return to normal function" is considerably more than just walking without a limp.

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