

Originally published in The NEBCA Newsletter 2015

Lad's Retirement

By Jennifer Glen

Those who know more than me in this sport tell you never to buy your next dog as a puppy. Buy a one year old, buy a two year old but a puppy is risky. How do you know if it's going to suit you, or even work at all? But I guess I'm not a good listener because I got Laddie when he was just 7 weeks old. I was familiar with his lines and had owned others in his family so I thought it was worth the risk. I'm sure you are not surprised to hear me say it was love at first sight. I adored that little fluffy tri colored puppy and took him everywhere I went. He was quite popular at the trials we went to that spring with his little speckled belly. A year later, my husband worked Lad for me for his first month of training. He was a quick study and it was a seamless transition to my style of handling when he was given back to me. Lad and I clicked right away and at first I was surprised at how easily we won our first nursery classes, but then came to expect it as Lad's biddability was reliable. He stood out at the Nursery Finals that year and won the Most Promising Nursery Dog award. I liked to call it the "Despite Your Handler Award" because I wasn't skilled enough to get us any higher than 15th place, but Laddie was noticed by the judges anyway. Just before his nursery finals, I moved him up into open and his first big boy class was at Soldier Hollow. It's a difficult trial even for experienced dogs and I'd be lying if I said he didn't struggle on the outrun. But he always took the help I offered and never argued and he found his sheep. When our run was over, the judge told me I could just go put him in his truck if I wanted. Laddie always made me proud.

The years passed and Laddie remained reliable. He gave me confidence every time I went to the post that either he, or my other dog, Hemp, would give me a fighting chance of doing well. All too soon they both started showing grey hairs around their eyebrows. I knew the R word, "retirement", was getting closer but they were still running well so I kept them going, past eight, past nine. At 10, I knew it had to be their last year. Hemp's body was already causing him to limp and he wasn't going to make it to the finals. His retirement came mid summer when I realized I just couldn't keep running him when he kept coming off the field lame. Laddie was feeling fit, even outrunning my 2 year old when running with the quad, but his mind was slowing him down. It started with him hesitating on flanks when he used to love to be told he could flank, and then it progressed to just stopping and staring as the sheep ran away. He still wanted to work, he just didn't seem to want to be told to work anymore. So I knew it was time to end his career too. It was hard to fathom anything beyond Hemp and Lad. It was if there was a big dark abyss on the other side of them. This is what I do. Shepherding. And they were who I did it with. They DEFINED me. My youngsters coming up were so different and unknown. I knew Lad and Hemp and knew what they could do for me and how to ask for it. There is a deeper bond with a working dog than a pet and owner will ever experience but now it all had changed and I kept seeing the end coming. When I sent him on his outrun at the Bluegrass, something I had done 16 times in our past, I thought, "This is the last time he will run up that field." At Dr. Ben's trial, I thought, "This is the last shed he will nail on these sheep" and it made me very sad.

I picked the date. Soldier Hollow. I thought it was fitting that the location of his first open trial should be his last. He happily walked through the crowds, knowing where he was and what was going to happen next. We waited in the blind and I watched the dogs running before us. It was warm, it was windy, and the sheep were pushing on the dogs. Some weren't getting them down the field. Some weren't getting them around on the drive. I frantically thought, "How can I make his last run be with dignity if he can't push them around on the drive?"

I finally came up with a plan, but as I walked to the post, I couldn't help but start crying. This wasn't just the last time I took him to the post at Soldier Hollow, this was the last time he ever went to the post. I stopped at the judge's stand where Lyle Lad waited to mark my run, and I explained why I was crying while we waited for our sheep to be set. She told me she totally understood and to remember all the good things he had done for me on the field. Then she started to cry. I moved up to the post, set him up, and sent him. He went off with the confidence of the Lad of old (young). Up the large hill and onto the dirt road that told me he was on the right path. Past the bushes and trees and came in at the top, right on target. With a little encouragement, he lifted them and started them down the hill. They were pushing on him to go over to my right and sneak into the cabin on the field to make a dash back up to the set out pens. Lad thwarted their plan but was unable to get them back on line again to make the panels.

Not caring about who was watching or about any kind of score, but hoping he'd hear the support in my voice, I started encouraging him, "Come on, Laddie, ATTA BOY!" He pushed back on them and got them to my feet. Together, we moved them around the post and then I told him to lie down and let them go. I turned to Lyle, and told her that was good for us bent down and pet him, and whispered to him "That'll do, Lad. Go get wet." He joyfully ran to the water tub while his sheep were exhausted and I went to him and helped wet him down and explained to him what a wonderful job he had done. I had decided not to do the drive. It was the only way I could think of to give him his dignity. So we called his outrun lift, fetch, and post turn his "Victory Lap". And Laddie was retired.