

Max the Golden

February 2009 Dog Talk® Dog of the Month

I have chosen dogs and cats of the month for a variety of reasons, but never has there been a dog and his people so richly deserving of this small but heartfelt recognition as Max, a beloved 10-year-old Golden, who went from being suddenly diagnosed with bone cancer to being a successful amputee in the course of a week. Max's Mom Pam (as she signs her letters) began what was to become a long and intimate email exchange between us about Max's situation. I admire this lady and her equally devoted daughter Julie so much – almost as much as I salute their ever-cheerful and life-affirming Golden Max, who has come through this with shining colors.

In order for you to appreciate the depth of this experience for Pam, Julie and Max, I have included our entire correspondence here.



Jan 29th Dear Tracie

Enclosed are a few pictures - the first is a close-up of Max's beautiful face (one of my favorite photos of him). I would like you to use this for Dog of the Month. The second is my daughter saying goodbye to Max at the hospital. He is giving her his cancer paw (the very last time he would do that) and I believe telling her not to worry and that everything's going to be all right. The third is seconds after we saw Max for the first time after surgery. The relief and happiness is obvious on all of our faces (Max's, too). The last picture is Max's first walk the morning after surgery, exactly one week to the day after the cancer diagnosis. I look at this picture - my guy standing upright, alive, and no longer in that excruciating pain, and my heart bursts with happiness. What an emotional week!

You asked for a short bio. Like any loving pet owner, a short bio seems impossible, but here goes:

We adopted Max at the age of 9 months from Long Island Golden Retriever Rescue. He had been kept tied to a tree in the backyard of his prior owners who did not want him anymore because he had "gotten too big." The following Mother's Day my husband brought home our second Golden, Buddy, who was about to be surrendered to the pound by a co-worker because he was "too energetic." Our third Golden, Sally Ann, was a breeder for the Guide Dog Foundation, recently retired after donating 4 litters. We puppy-raised one of Sally's daughters, Maizy, a Golden/Lab mix, and she did not pass as a Guide Dog and now lives with us - which makes our Golden family a total of four.



Max started limping on January 9th. The Vet thought he may have fallen on the ice and sprained his leg so we treated with medication and kept his activity low. By the following

weekend he was hardly using the leg, leaning a lot, and mostly just lying around. X-rays on January 17th showed the cancer. Further tests at Animal Medical Center in NYC revealed that the cancer was isolated to his leg and, therefore, he would be a good candidate for amputation, even at the ripe old age of 10. The surgery was performed on January 21st, and today he is alive and walks on three legs. If you would have told me a week ago that things would be so good today, I would never have believed it. I sleep on the floor beside my boy and smell his fur and listen to him breathe and love him even more for his strength and for teaching me that nothing is impossible. There is no doubt in my mind that he will swim and chase tennis balls at the beach this summer.



Thank you for making My Golden Max your Dog of the Month. It is a beautiful honor that we will cherish always. And thank you also for your very informative radio show. I have learned so much from you and your interesting guests. I hope someday, after Max completes chemotherapy, that I can call the show and share our experience with your listeners. Maybe we can make it a little easier for another pet owner faced with the diagnosis of canine cancer.

Sincerely, Max's Mom, Pam

This was the beginning of our exchange, which grew through the days.

Jan 18th Dear Tracie,

I listen to you every Saturday. I've even spoken to you once or twice. But now I've got a huge problem. My ten year old Golden was diagnosed yesterday with Osteosarcoma after bringing him to the vet because he was limping for a few days. We thought he had slipped on the ice. Can you tell me where I can find information on your website about how to get treatment and how to decide what treatment to get? My vet is Pam Mox in Manorville but she is not a cancer specialist. Do you know of any? Please help. As you can see from my email address, Max is my boy. I want to do what is best for him and it looks like we have to do something quickly. He is limping badly.

I trust your judgment and all the guests you have on your show. Is there anyone that can help me and Max? Thank you.

Jan 18th Dear Pam -

I am so sorry to hear about Max - what devastating news. I'm putting your email ahead of all the others I have to answer so you can get right on top of deciding how to treat his illness. Dr. Gerry Post is a really excellent oncologist and compassionate - he was in Westchester but now seems to be at a very caring specialty hospital in Westbury, which is lucky geographically for you. I'm afraid that you will find that the only treatment for Max's bone cancer is amputation - which Gerry has done successfully on many dogs and gained them a longer life with quality - but it depends on how far advanced Max's cancer is, which leg is affected (if a front leg, which is the usual, then amputation is often really well tolerated if the dog is not overweight and is fit).

These are hard decisions to make and if you don't have pet insurance, maybe not affordable. No matter what you decide to do, a good investment is Dr Alice Villalobos' book linked on her page on my website. It will help you understand all the medical terminology, the options, and how to give Max the best possible care from now until the end. "Canine and Feline Geriatric Oncology" sounds like the textbook it is, but it is of tremendous help to the average person suffering through this difficult time

My heart goes out to your family and Max - feel free to get back in touch by email or on the air next Saturday if you need help deciding or deciphering what to do next.

Jan 19th Dear Tracie -

After speaking to my vet, Pam Moks, I have made an appointment for Max tomorrow with an oncologist at the American Medical Center in Manhattan. I know it is quite a hike, but my Vet says this is where she would go if it were her dog and since I love my Vet, I've got to trust her. You are right that amputation is the only option if the cancer has not spread. We will find that out tomorrow. But, Max being 10, can he really bounce back from an amputation? Or do I let him die with dignity and in not too much pain? My mind goes round and round. He is very fit - very athletic - loves to run, swim and is

completely ball crazy- wakes me up with a ball in his mouth. Up until this point, Max never acted like a senior dog. I thought he would be a puppy forever. Of course, I will tell the oncologist this. I need more information before I can even think about making a decision. Right now, all I can do is look at him and

know that I will not have him forever - we all want that, right? I have 3 other Golden Retrievers - but Max - well, Tracie, he is just my guy. He won't even leave a room without me behind him. How will I ever get used to not having that amazing bond? I adopted him from the Long Island Golden Retriever Rescue when he was 9 months old. Some idiot family said he had gotten too big so they kept him tied to a tree in the backyard and wouldn't let him in the house. A 9-month Golden tied to a tree - can you even imagine that? He is (was) as active now as he was then.

Anyway, I can't thank you enough for writing back so quickly. You say on your broadcast that you answer every one of your e-mails and, boy, you were right. You are truly an amazing animal person and I know because it takes one to know one, right? I have learned so much from listening to your program.

By the way, I DO have pet insurance - on all my dogs - with a cancer endorsement. It is tough sometimes making that monthly payment but it is real nice knowing now that money will not come into play when making the ultimate decision. I know this is long. I could write forever about Max. If I don't hear from you before tomorrow, wish us luck. Thanks again. I'll keep you posted.

Jan 20th Dear Tracie

The Visit to AMC went very well. They were extremely caring and attentive - from the attendant who came out to carry Max out of the car at 11 a.m. to the orthopedic surgeon who spoke to us about amputation surgery at 2:30. And all the doctors and people we saw in between were kind, compassionate, informative, and answered all of our millions of questions and waited while we wiped our tears and composed ourselves - and, believe me, the tears were flowing.

Our experience was completely positive. Every doctor gave us their card and e-mail address and told us to call whenever and with whatever questions we had. They were all kind and very easy to talk to. I would not want a pet owner to have a bad experience at such a difficult time and I would want you to spread the word because I know how the public listens to you. My daughter and I have only glowing things to say about the care we received today. One of the doctors even called us 10 minutes after we returned home.

We could treat the pain, orally, with radiation therapy, and by IV. Since bone cancer pain is excruciating, the medication would be heavy and he would be sedated for most of the rest of his life. We dismissed that choice immediately. We would not subject our very active, high play-drive Golden to sedation just so that we could touch him, smell him, hug and kiss him, and look at him- much too selfish and he deserved more than that. The next choice was euthanasia. We couldn't talk about that without feeling violently sick but

we knew it was a fair option for Max. The third choice was amputation and chemotherapy. The oncologists and surgeons at AMC believed, without a doubt, that because of Max's good health and athleticism, he was a candidate for amputation. They would do a complete set of radiographs of his spine and long bones

to make sure the cancer had not spread. If everything was clear, they would amputate. If not, we would take him home and make another heartbreaking decision. So, they x-rayed his lungs and did an ultrasound of his spleen - all clear. We were given the option of leaving Max at AMC overnight and they would do the additional radiographs under anesthesia and possible amputation on Wednesday. But Julie and I just could not bear that. We were not ready. We had to process all that we had learned in the many hours we were at AMC. Information about pain treatment, chemotherapy, cancer was coming at us from all sides. We needed to take Max home and, like I wrote to you, sleep on it.

We also discussed taking Max for a second opinion with Gerry Post. We decided we would call Dr. Post in the morning for an appt on Thursday.

My daughter just came in to tell me that she is about to pass out from exhaustion. I promised her we would all sleep together tonight - me, her, and our 4 Golden Retrievers, so I will end here. It has been a very long, difficult day, especially for Max. We have a lot of information to digest, but at least we understand the facts behind our available choices - all of which right now seem incomprehensible. Hopefully, things will be clearer in the morning and we can make a decision. So, we're going to "sleep on it" - and wrap ourselves up in a big, warm, Golden blanket. How lucky we are.

Sincerely, Max's Mom, Pam

Jan 20th Dear Pam –

What a beautiful thoughtful letter. How generous of you to share with me your very positive experience at such a dark time - you deserve that, as does Max. Please do not underestimate how much your own stress, pain, tears, anger, etc. affect him - it's important to do the best you can at not exposing him to too much of it because it will add to his own burden.

I am really delighted to learn that AMC is so respectful of the human-animal bond because sometimes the big specialty hospitals can get impersonal.

I'm sure you will come to the right conclusion for your family about what course to take with Max, but I am here if you need another ear or shoulder.

Sleep well.

Jan 21st Dear Tracie:

Max did not have a good night. He did not sleep for more than minutes at a time and he was extremely restless. He moaned. He cried. He panted. He kept getting up and leaning with his good side on my daughter looking her right in the face as if to say - help me, don't let me go through another night like this. He broke our hearts. We looked at him and asked ourselves what are we doing? Why are we letting him suffer just because we are not brave enough to face the facts and make a decision?

Jan 21st Dear Pam - Hope this will cheer you a bit in this difficult time. I'd like to choose Max as February's Dog of the month - to salute his loving relationship with you and his Golden siblings and to send him good wishes and support in this trying time

There are a number of goodies that come with this honor so I'll need your mailing address.

I'll also need a photo of him to post on my website with a short description from you about him and his place in our family.

I hope this will make you proud and happy - as happy as possible right now

I think it will boost Max's spirits to know he's a winner

Let me know how things are going.

Jan 22nd Dear Tracie

Well, Julie and I are now crying (again) after reading your e-mail. But this time we are crying with happiness. What you want to do for Max - well, it is truly a gift. He is OUR dog of the month, every month. But when I tell you what has transpired since my last e-mail you will see why your choice is more than perfect.

Tuesday night Julie and I laid in bed with our 4 babies and discussed our choices for Max as presented to us by the AMC. So wound up calling AMC in the morning. We were headed into the City once again by 9 a.m.- Julie driving and me in the back seat with Max's warm, soft head in my lap. And by 11 AM, they were walking Max away from us - for the last time on 4 legs. I don't know if it was the right thing to do, but I took a picture of him as they took him away. A million thoughts were going through my head - were we doing the right thing? Would we ever see him alive again? Would he be mad at us that we made this decision? Did he have the energy left to fight at his ripe old age of 10?

I don't know how my daughter drove home. I am a cowardly parkway driver so my daughter is always my chauffeur. She drove and cried. I comforted her and tried not to cry.

It sounds cliché, but the following hours were the longest of our lives. We did not hear from the surgeon until 5 p.m. to tell us that the cancer had not spread and that they were prepping Max for surgery. And then more hours - and at 9 p.m. Dr. Schwartz calls to tell

us it was a routine surgery, Max did great, he was groggy but alert. We could go to sleep and they would call us in the morning.

And at 8 a.m. the doctor calls to say Max was standing and **TOOK A FEW STEPS! AND HE ATE HIS BREAKFAST - EVERY BIT OF IT!** And for the absolute first time, Julie and I knew in our hearts that we **HAD** made the right decision. Max **WILL** swim at the beach this summer - he **WILL** be the tennis ball crazy dog he's always been - he **WILL** want to play tug with everything he picks up.

So this morning we are getting "his" room ready. He will be coming home tomorrow and he must be kept away from the other dogs while he is recuperating. I'm going out to buy some white t-shirts to keep the incision clean and away from him and the other dogs. And, of course, to make him even more handsome than he already is! We are trying to come up with some appropriate saying to have printed on the shirts but we haven't thought of anything yet. Any ideas?

So, you see, for you to make our Max February's Dog of the Month is just so amazing and wonderful. He certainly **IS** a winner, but so are we for having him in our lives. I will have my daughter scan some pictures and send them to you. My knowledge of the computer is limited to writing e-mails. Do you want photos of him before or after his surgery or both? I am so giddy with happiness, I will send you whatever you want. My baby boy is alive and will be coming home without Cancer. If we just get one more summer at the beach chasing sticks and tennis balls, that's enough for me. Wait till they see him at the beach - he will be the talk of the town!!!!

By the way, Max's 10th birthday is February 8th. Mine (56th) is February 5th. You see how closely Max and I are connected?

Tracie, what you have done - the support you have given us - well, I can't thank you enough. I don't know if you remember - but a few months back I called your show to speak with your animal communicator - I think her name was Ann Marie. I called to tell her that I was calling my new cat DeLilah by the name of my deceased cat Layla - not all the time but often enough. She told me that Layla was coming back to help me with a very difficult decision I had to make - and she couldn't have been more right. Do you remember that phone call? It was pretty extraordinary for me.

I will keep you posted after Max comes home. Feel free to print any of my e-mails. If anyone can learn from what we have gone through, that would be wonderful. I intend to document everything so that I **CAN** help other Golden owners.

I hope we can meet some day. I will bring my handsome, three-legged Max to see you. My God, I can't believe I am even able to say that. How good life feels today.

Sincerely, Max's Mom, Pam

Jan 23rd Dear Pam -

WOWie. Now you have me blubbering with tears. What a deeply feeling person you are and how talented you are at conveying it. I am honored that Max is going to be the Dog of the Month - it will be a privilege to salute him. I definitely want photos of before & after - he will be a champion tripod, I am sure. I am so very happy you made this decision and the doctors backed it up - congratulations to you and to Max for being such troopers. And I need your daughter's name so she can have a DogTalk baseball cap, too. Max clearly has two guardian angels.

My heart goes out to you all.



Jan 24th Dear Tracie - Well, he is home. There is much to tell you but I got very little sleep last night. Of course, I "slept" on the floor with Max, looking at him and listening to every sound that came out of his very exhausted body. It was so difficult getting him into the house and then out again when he needed to relieve himself. A LOT more difficult than I had anticipated. He gets so tired, and there really is no easy way out of my house. I came close to breaking down when he fell, but I know I have to be strong for my Max.

When the doctor brought him to us, Max actually pulled him and almost sprinted to greet us. Julie and I were amazed and excited. But after last night, we know we have quite a ways to go. But we'll get there.

Tracie - You are so right about Max having 2 guardian angels. Without my daughter by my side through all this, I'm sure I would have fallen apart. Her name is Julie, and her love for Max equals mine.

There is something else I never told you. I had Max in a training program a few years back to become a therapy dog. They said he was perfect except for one thing - he would give paw without being asked. They wanted me to break him of it but I couldn't do that to him. To me, that is one of his most endearing traits and something that has tugged at our hearts these past few days because he hasn't been able to do it. Maybe he could be a therapy dog now.

Thanks again for everything. Your interest in our story and support for Max have been amazing and so encouraging at this challenging time.

Jan 31st Dear Tracie:

I received Max's goody bag today, and I just wanted to thank you. The treats will, of course, be shared with Max's siblings - as a matter of fact they all had a taste as soon as the box was opened! The hats are adorable and Julie and I will wear them proudly. I am going to look through all the brochures you sent me. I am interested in anything that will help to make my pets healthier.

I was only able to listen to the first half of your show today because I had to take Max to the Vet at 11:30. He has an infection at the bottom of his incision - not too bad because I took him as a I saw a little redness. He was healing so beautifully and becoming so alert and active again, so I am a bit upset over this setback. I know he'll be fine in a few days, but my happiness scale has come down a notch because now he is pretty lethargic again. Julie and I are going to rent a movie tonight and we are all going to stay quiet and snuggle.

I am going to write to Dr. Lisa of The Doctors show. I have stopped watching that show because they say lots of stupid things that they have no business saying. As I told you Max was tied to a tree by his former owners. What I didn't tell you is that they kept him outside because they had just had a baby and thought Max was too big and would hurt the baby. I am a nanny. I have had little ones in my house since I adopted Max and he is gentle as can be around children. I also have 7 cats and had cats when Julie was a baby. Dr. Lisa had no right saying what she did. How many pregnant pet owners will now think about giving up their pet because of her ignorance? That's all we need - another ridiculous reason to give pet owners to justify the abandonment of their animals.

Max is having his staples removed on Wednesday and his first chemotherapy is on February 9th. His birthday is Feb 10th so I guess the chemo is a strange kind of birthday present.

In response to your "P.S.", I do have pet insurance for all of my Goldens. I have VPI. I am not especially happy with them and intend to look into Pets Best, which you endorse.

But they will never cover Max's cancer treatment so I will probably just switch over the others. If I didn't have the insurance, my decision to treat Max's cancer may have been different. The bills so far have been pretty hefty. Having the insurance certainly does give you peace of mind at a time when your mind is anything but peaceful.

I look forward to seeing Max's smiling face on your website. Max sends some slobbery kisses to his Auntie Tracie.

Sincerely, Max's Mom, Pam

UPDATE:

Dear Tracie:

This morning, Julie and I saw everything you did for Max as Dog of the Month. We were absolutely blown away by how much of your website you devoted to him. You brought tears of happiness to our eyes. I have sent the link to every person on the planet that I know! We are just so, so proud of our celebrity Golden boy!

He is responding so well to the antibiotics. He pulled me all over the yard this morning, ice and all! He almost took ME down and I had to let go of the leash for fear we would both take a tumble! I am in awe of him!

Before the surgery, Max was 84 lbs. He was weighed at the Vet on Saturday and he was only 72 lbs. I looked at the Doctor and her assistant and asked "how is that possible?" and after the words were out of my mouth, and from the solemn looks on their faces, I knew - THE LEG. The leg is gone. I said the words over and over in my head and choked back the tears. I suppose that realization will hit me in the gut many more times, but this time was a doozy.

I have had pets all my life. Animals know that if they show up in my front yard they have a home for life, even if they're pregnant with 5 kittens! I have been through diabetes, kidney failure, tumors, Cushing's disease, severe giardia, and I don't remember what else. I have had to euthanize many beloved pets and that is NEVER easy. But nothing compares to the past 2 weeks with Max. The rollercoaster of emotions - shock, devastation, horrendous decision making, anxiety, worry, happiness, and then anxiety again. And I know with chemotherapy in Max's future there will be more challenges. But I wouldn't trade it for the world. I know, for whatever reasons, we are meant to be faced with all of this. I am keeping a very detailed diary of all we are going through. I KNOW Max and I will be able to help someone, somewhere, down the line.

Thank you again. I know I keep saying this, but making Max Dog of the Month is just the most wonderful thing. You should have seen Julie's face this morning when she discovered that Max's story was on your website for all the world to see. And you should

have seen Max's tail wag when we told him that he was a celebrity! He said "thank you, Auntie Tracie!"

One more thing, yesterday I knelt down in front of Max to give him one of the million hugs and kisses I give him each day and HE GAVE ME HIS PAW! I just got goose bumps telling you that. Not even 2 weeks after surgery and he did something I wasn't sure he would ever be able to do. Is there any doubt in your mind that Max can accomplish anything?

Don't ever stop doing what you do - we pet lovers need you!

Sincerely,
Max's Mom, Pam