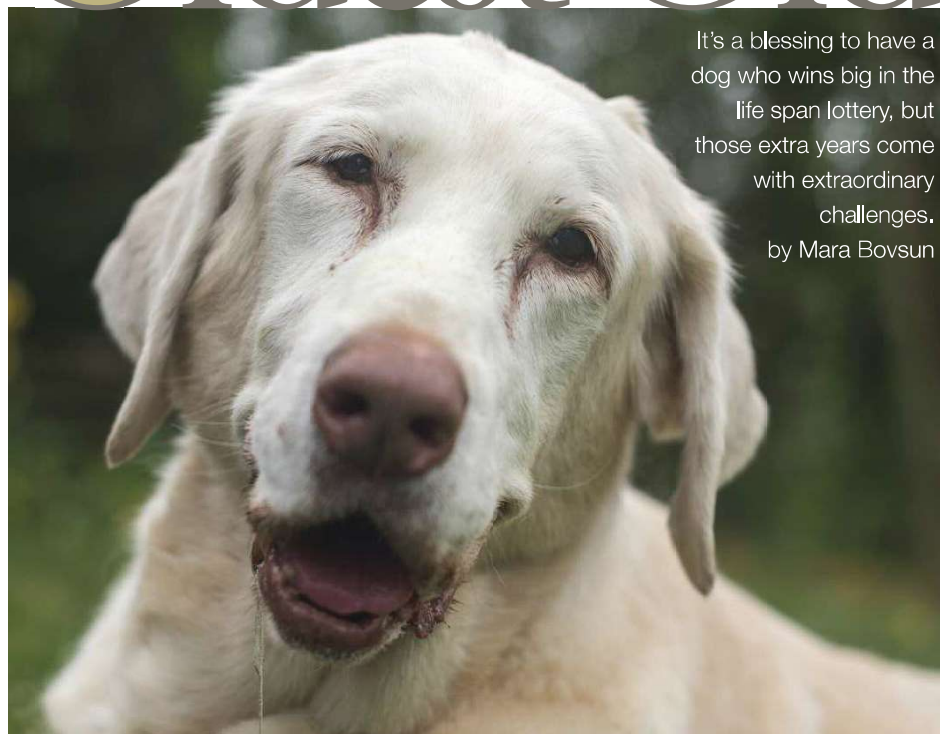


The Oldest Old



It's a blessing to have a dog who wins big in the life span lottery, but those extra years come with extraordinary challenges.
by Mara Bovsun

a quote credited to Bette Davis kept going through my mind as I navigated the churning rapids that is life with an extremely aged dog. *Old age ain't no place for sissies.*

The realization that a dog has entered that no-sissies zone often comes as a

shock. It certainly did for me when it became clear that Maggie, my sassy, powerful, perpetual-motion machine of a Labrador Retriever had become a very old lady.

The signs were, at first, almost imperceptible. Her dash had a little less speed and

she stopped trying to leap fences that she could sail over in her youth. She developed strange-looking warty growths. She started breathing funny.

These later signs began for Maggie around 12, an age at which many Labs have already departed this world. Cancer tops the cause-of-death list for her breed. I had lost two dogs to the disease and figured it would happen again. So I watched and waited.

As she grew older, Maggie exhibited several symptoms that I was sure were cancer.

Dogs and Memory Loss

Half of all dogs who reach age 11 will show some symptoms of canine cognitive dysfunction, also known as “doggie Alzheimer’s.” Signs include pacing, staring into space, failing to recognize people they love, and forgetting the basics, like house-training. “I think a lot of owners struggle to know if their aging dogs ‘are still there,’ so to speak, when the dogs are difficult to wake or don’t respond to their names, but then do still exhibit tail-wagging or interactive behaviors when touched by their owners,” says veterinarian Kate Creevy, who specializes in canine gerontology. There are supplements and drugs available, but no cure. “Until we better understand what is happening for these aged companions cognitively, it’s hard to know how to help owners help their dogs.”

My vet removed and biopsied some of her weird growths but, despite some scary names (like *cavernous hemangioma*), they turned out to be nothing. We stopped removing them because it wasn’t worth the risk of anesthesia. Some grew, some bled, they were all unsightly. But they were not cancer.

Likewise, when a respiratory issue popped up in her 13th year, I was certain it was a lung tumor. She started throwing up buckets of white foam and bile. One night, it came to a crisis and we rushed to an emergency room, where vets discovered, not cancer, but a life-threatening case of geriatric-onset laryngeal paralysis (GOLP). Only surgery could save her life.

“Do you think she’ll survive an operation?” I asked. “She’s over 13.”

For some reason, the team of vets (there were at least six) thought it was worth a try.

Forty-eight hours later, this dog who had been teetering on the brink of death was back to her old self, so demanding that she was driving everyone crazy. The vets who days earlier had gone to enormous lengths to save her now wanted her out of their hair. They requested that I take her home a few days early. She recovered quickly and was soon up and ready for mischief.

Great Escapers

As she neared 14, Maggie entered into the realm that, in human gerontology, is



FEATURE

ALL PHOTOS BY JANE SOBEL KLONSKY EXCEPT WHERE NOTED



Teaching easy tricks, like peek-a-boo, kept her spirits up.

considered the “oldest old,” over 85 to those who celebrate triple-digit birthdays. Scientists studying elderly humans have discovered that these people seem resistant to the ailments—such as cancer and heart disease—that claim their peers at younger ages, says Daniel Promislow, director of the Canine Longevity Consortium (uwaging.org/CLC). CLC is an NIH-funded project aimed at finding the factors that influence canine life span.

Humans with exceptional longevity fall into three categories. These also appear to apply to dogs:

Survivors have had a bout with a lethal disease but respond well to treatment and live on into extreme old age.

Delayers develop lethal illnesses, but very late in life.

Escapers avoid the more catastrophic ailments altogether and die of degenerative conditions; the body simply wears out.

In humans, cancer deaths rise with age, but only up to a point. The disease tails off in the extreme elderly. Studies conducted by biogerontology researcher David J. Waters, DVM, PhD, suggest that dogs who age successfully somehow manage to live on even if they develop tumors. Waters, director of the Center for Exceptional Longevity Studies at the Gerald P. Murphy Cancer Foundation, has compiled a database of more than 300 Rottweilers who lived past 13, about 30 percent longer than the breed average. He has also studied 90 of these ultra-seniors in their homes.

“Our autopsy studies have shown that, although few of these dogs die of cancer, more than 95 percent of them are harboring one or more types of cancer at the time of death,” says Waters, author of “Cancer Clues from Pet Dogs” that ran in September’s *Scientific American*.

Warding off disease is not the whole story. Waters, for example, observed lower stress levels in the Rottweilers he studied;

The Best Thing You Can Do to Help Your Elderly Dog

“The one thing that is true for dogs at all ages is that being overweight or obese makes everything else worse,” says veterinarian Kate Creevy. “Old dogs with stiff joints move around even more poorly if they’re fat. Old dogs with laryngeal paralysis struggle to breathe even more if they’re fat. Maintaining their dogs in a healthy, lean body condition is good advice for owners of dogs at any age, to help them live longer, and age more comfortably.”

Other things that helped Maggie included regular swims with a water therapist (which we had to discontinue after her LP operation because of the risk of inhaling water) and mental stimulation through continued training. For relief of the painful joints, we used Adequan injections, tramadol, and Rimadyl. Other owners of elderly dogs swear by some natural products, such as turmeric and raw honey, but we did not have the opportunity to try these.

Also, as her mobility waned, we turned to several walking aids, including the Help-Em-Up Harness and, finally, a red wagon.

nothing seemed to bother them.

So is a serene soul the key to a long life?

That may be part of it, but there’s something else that’s intangible, a special kind of resilience that scientists are trying to pin down.

Maggie, both survivor and escaper, had this. Over the years, health problems brought her to the vet—a tooth infection, painful warts, urinary tract infections—but she always healed quickly and with astonishing ease.

A Cascade

After the GOLP operation she could breathe well enough, but she still had difficulty moving. Loss of mobility is one of the most common issues for elderly dogs and it’s not easy to isolate a cause, says veterinarian Kate Creevy, DVM, MS, DACVIM, associate professor, Small Animal Internal

Medicine, University of Georgia. “We lack a sophisticated system to assess neuromuscular function in aging dogs, with many dogs who exhibit difficulty moving around being [classified] as ‘getting old.’ It’s not just hindquarter weakness that they seem to exhibit, but weakness and changes to gait and mobility in all aspects.”

GOLP used to be considered solely a respiratory issue, but now scientists have found that it is just one sign of widespread decline, a creeping paralysis known as polyneuropathy. In many cases, the operation that Maggie had gives a dog a year or so more, but the associated muscle degeneration is often terminal.

Creevy says a number of other conditions come with advancing years (see sidebar). In addition to GOLP, the major ones for Maggie were:

Old Dog Vestibular Disease: This dizzy-



The Outer Limits

How old do dogs get? Most people can expect a dozen years, and the average age at death overall is around 12.5. Smaller dogs generally have longer lives than their larger cousins, with some giant breeds rarely making it in to the double digits. Still, the record books have accounts of dogs living twice as long. Among the dogs that Jane Sobel Klonsky has photographed, she says her oldest models were Avery, who passed on at 18.5, and Sarge, a Rat Terrier who was still going strong at 20.

ness often resolves on its own, but only after a few days of terror, during which you are certain it's a brain tumor or stroke. In Maggie's case, she staggered, drooled excessively, held her head at a weird angle, and couldn't focus. Her vets suspected ODVD, and kept her in the hospital and watched. In a few days, she was over the worst of it and able to come home, but required assistance walking. Many people mistake this condition for something worse and may choose to euthanize their dogs, thinking there is no hope. But it may be prudent to take a watch-and-wait approach if you see these kinds of symptoms.

Circadian Rhythm Disruption: Many owners of elderly dogs say that their pets sleep all day and then are up all night, barking, fretting, or pacing. As in humans, underlying factors, such as canine cognitive disorder (see sidebar), loss of vision, and anxiety can alter the internal time clock.

Rapid Slide

At the start of 2015—in her 15th year—she was still able to ride the elevator down 17 flights from our apartment to the street to do her business. She still insisted on walking the block to visit her friend, Hector, who had been giving her cookies since her first week in the city a decade and a half earlier. In February, her spirits seemed low, and our vet suggested that we “keep her engaged.” So I started giving her lessons in the same tricks that I was teaching my two younger dogs. She couldn't do sits or



At 13, Maggie gleefully welcomed puppy Emily into the house and, ages notwithstanding, they became best buddies.

downs anymore, and had to wear a diaper when we practiced in our apartment building's hallways. Her hindquarter weakness made it hard to predict when she was going to “lose it.” Still, there were lots of moves she could master—leg weaves, twirls, low jumps, for example—that she performed with great enthusiasm. In April, we earned a novice tricks title from Do More With Your Dog (domorewithyour-dog.com).

Other Issues

Here's a list of common conditions seen among very old dogs owned and cared for by the members of Buddy's Senior Rescue and Senior Stories, a Facebook group devoted to this age bracket:

Vision and hearing loss	Incontinence
Thyroid problems	Cancer
Arthritis	Heart disease
Kidney failure	Hormone disorders

In May, she was spry enough to pose for photographer Jane Sobel Klonsky, whose Project Unconditional (projectunconditional.info) celebrates senior dogs. In June, at the two-year anniversary of her LP operation, she was still full of

her old spunk, still nagging me if I was too slow with her supper. I had convinced myself that this might go on forever and a decade hence her picture would be in Guinness World Records.

Then came July. Every day, she seemed to slide a little bit more. Within weeks, she was unable to move off her bed, and in a diaper at all times. It was impossible to keep her clean, leaving her open to urine scald, sores, and even a case of fly strike. Her muscles kept weakening, literally shrinking, until some parts of her hindquarters were just skin over bone. By mid-August, there was no escaping the reality that it was time to move on.

As she had throughout her life, Maggie rose to the challenges of this phase, and along the way taught me a lot about patience, love, and compromise. Her last months were very difficult, but at the same time, I'm so grateful that I had the chance to help her through it, grateful for the incredible gift that is a very old dog. 🐾