

A two-dog night comes, but doesn't go

Curtis Seltzer

BLUE GRASS, Va.—We put down both of our Labs last week—10-year-old Lucy to a failed liver that yellowed her eyes and nine-year-old Sophie to spinal cancer that took away her jump, her run and was working on her walk.

Endings are never easy with pets. Nor should they be. Pets occupy our homes at least as much as we do. They create routines for us—now is their time for breakfast, now is their time for a walk, now is their time for a rub or a scratch.

They're family, without the complications. They're always willing to listen, and they don't need to vent. They don't hold grudges over past mistakes. Some are willing to follow sound advice whether or not they understand the need for it. They fill emotional space.

Dogs, in particular, are easy friendships. They're steady, and they don't bite your head off when they're angry over something else. You don't have to say what you're feeling; they know.

They may not love us, but they put up with us and stick with us, even the worst of us, even when we treat them badly. They never choose divorce.

Our Labs never had the complex coyness of our cats. We've never had a subtle Lab. None have ever ignored me or hurt my feelings. I never had one mad at me. They never hissed.

It's easy, however, to hurt a Lab's feelings. Ours never liked being left out. When I couldn't let Sophie walk up the road with me, she would wait next to our front gate for 90 minutes until I returned. Then she'd jump up and down when she saw me. All was forgiven. No one else in my family was ever this happy to see me when I came home.

The problem with Labs, like other purebred dogs, is that they are highly inbred. You get their looks and their temperaments, but you also get hip issues, joint and bone disease, epilepsy, cancer and heart disease that can limit their lives to between seven and 10 years.

Professional breeders try to eliminate or minimize these health risks. But it's hard to weed out the bad traits and keep the good ones when you're breeding back into an ever smaller pool of "good" dogs. Shade-tree puppy flippers care about moving inventory, less about health and longevity.

Cross breeding -- either to another purebred or to a genuine mutt -- produces healthier dogs as a general rule, but you forfeit the iconic look.

Lucy was an expensive pup who came from a highly regarded kennel that we had used before. She had the classic build and beauty of a British Lab. But it was soon apparent that “good breeding” had left her big boxy head filled with a small sense of self, weak instincts and, to speak bluntly, limited smarts. Bark, for example, was a stretch.

Sophie was a dog we took in after her owner, a Virginia state trooper, was left paralyzed from a winter car wreck. I guessed that she had been a flip out of an under-the-porch marriage mill. We thought two dogs would be happier than one.

Sophie was not a good-looking Lab, with her too-long snout and a big knot on the top of her head. But she was much “doggier” than Lucy—more active, more aggressive, emotionally healthier, more adventurous and more willful. She remained a teenager for most of her life.

It was only in her last couple of years that she found a working calmness and stopped driving me nuts with doing things she wanted to do rather than things I needed her to do. She finally understood that “Stay around.” did not mean “Take off.”

Lucy and Sophie lived together with us for about eight years. They were friends, but jealous of the other getting human affection. They would jostle for the optimum petting position, ducking under each other’s neck to get next to us.

We knew their personalities, and they lived with ours. We adjusted to each other’s quirks. It wasn’t marriage, but it was more than a group house.

Lucy got slightly more attention, which is understandable because her ears were much softer, she didn’t wiggle and she didn’t dig her toenails into my bare feet. She was a kind and gentle animal who never had a bad word to say about either life or me.

Sophie preferred being scratched to being rubbed. She never figured out that she would get more scratch time if she didn’t immediately flop on her back out of reach.

Lucy slept curled like a cashew. Sophie slept on her back, legs splayed with her cheeks dripping upside down revealing her canines.

Melissa could get both to grin. I could get both to settle down on their mats.

Dogs have memory, but live in the present. Sophie never held it against me that I’d scold her when she ran off to follow her passions. I was not so generous with forgiving her.

Lucy was happiest when she found the sweet spot of inoffensiveness. She had a clear sense of right and wrong, and usually tried to do right. As a pup, she had a hard time learning not to dig holes in our front yard—two of which blew out my knee one Sunday morning. I said things to her that I don't regret.

Sophie never met a wrong that she didn't think was right...when situated in circumstances of her choosing.

Lucy was one of those highly bred retrievers who never got the hang of retrieving. Melissa would throw a stick, and Lucy would stand immobile, looking at Melissa who would fetch it for another try. Lucy assumed that her role in stick was that of a spectator watching a quarterback practicing deep throws. After a while, she would lose fan interest and start munching grass.

Lucy never met a cat she didn't want to befriend.

Sophie had no use for cats and would bully them if they let her. She'd growl and snarl, and even snap. But when our 18-year-old barn cat settled on Sophie's mat, Sophie made do with secondary accommodations. Sophie was 80 pounds; the kitty, maybe three. It was a matter of who had the stronger personality.

Both dogs loved water and mud. I think they were happiest when they were chasing around in our pond, Sophie looking for frogs, snakes and snapping turtles; Lucy looking for...well, just looking, well, mostly just standing.

Lucy pretty much ground to a halt two years ago with arthritis. She stopped running and avoided walking as much as possible. She'd sleep away the day on her mat in our living room. It was harder and harder for her to stand. The drugs we finally gave her ruined her liver as we knew they would eventually.

Melissa took her to the vet and left her overnight. Nothing worked. We came the next day. We sat with her for a half hour on an exam room's floor, talking to her, telling her familiar things, rubbing her ears, her belly, her paws. The vet injected a beuthanasia drug into her IV. She closed her eyes and was gone in seconds.

Sophie's time came six days later in our orchard. Her cancer had spread in the two months since its discovery. She labored to get up even one step. The pain pills didn't stop her groaning. The last few days, she wanted to lie by the front gate, not inside on her mat. I think she was waiting for Lucy to come back.

A neighbor dug a small grave with his backhoe the evening before, near Melissa's favorite apple tree.

Sophie knew something was up when we walked her into the orchard with the vet. We settled her on her side. The vet gave her a sedative, which calmed none of us.

He injected the beuthanasia into her heart. She tried to rise. She looked me straight in the eyes. "What are you doing?" she asked. "How could you?"

She struggled. We worked to keep her down. The vet gave her two more injections. She wouldn't quit. It seemed like seven or eight minutes.

We laid her in the grave with her collar on. She had kept her eyes open. I shoveled it in.

I washed their feed dishes and took their sleeping mats away. We feel out of balance. They left a big hole. We've had at least one yellow Lab for 20 years.

We remember them running and playing, shaking dry while standing in the pond.

I remember them playing tag, sniffing up the woods in the spring.

I remember Sophie blasting after a ground hog while Lucy stood looking at me, saying something like, "I don't have a dog in this fight."

I remember them sleeping next to each other, Sophie chasing rabbits, Lucy being chased by her anxieties.

Everyone with a good dog goes through this.

They are missed.

We're thinking about going in again, but we're not quite there.

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