

SIX DAYS THAT CHANGED HER LIFE

Squiffy was my first Spanish Water Dog and during her life she has taught me so much about the breed and about dogs in general, so much so I was spurred on to take courses and qualifications in canine behaviour. It was through a desire to understand her and dogs like her that I felt the need to write it down, something that later became 'our book' on the breed.

Squiffy has proved to be a particularly special dog in so many ways, my close companion and mentor; she has the ability to read my thoughts and moods. To those who meet her, she appears to be a timid, nervous dog, avoiding their attentions and attempts to fuss her until they got to know the true Squiffy. The real Squiffy is a sensitive, intelligent, lively and bold dog, most at home in open countryside.

Squiffy was trained in obedience, agility and flyball, taking part in the 'GoFours' Flyball team for the first time at the age of ten, albeit the 'c' team, where her steadier, somewhat slower approach to the sport was not a hindrance as long as she remembered to keep hold of the ball until she was over the finish line.

Squiffy has lived a full and active life right up until the end of December 2009. What occurred next took place over a period of six days and, initially, left us distressed and devastated.

Only two weeks prior to this we had said goodbye to a sweet but aged bitch of another breed. Her passing, although very sad, was anticipated so it gave us time to prepare for and consequently deal with it. What happened to Squiffy was totally unanticipated and completely out of the blue. The progress of the disability was fast and fierce, one day she was enjoying running and retrieving, within days she was totally blind.

Squiffy's potential problem was first recognised in 2003 following the diagnosis of glaucoma in close relatives and this led to her being tested for predisposition to glaucoma. The result indicated that she had 'high' predisposition but at that time, she showed no signs of any problems, a state that remained throughout the rest of her life until those final days of December. I made a point of having her eyes checked at least once a year, including her pressures, in order to ascertain any possible changes. There were apparently none through to the final test in November 2008, when her pressures were 'normal' and I was assured that if she had not developed problems by then; she was highly unlikely to in the future.

The first indication of any problem was on December 30th 2009, when I noticed a change in the look of her left eye. It appeared to be slightly larger than normal and looked opaque. I promptly made an appointment and, taking all my test results and paperwork, saw a young vet, who diagnosed an infection. I expressed my concerns regarding this particular bitch and the history behind this problem so she arranged for me to see the owner of the practice the following day. Armed with all my paperwork we returned and the result of this visit was that Squiffy was diagnosed with conjunctivitis in both eyes. I reiterated my concerns and we agreed that I would monitor the progress of any problems over the New Year weekend. Unfortunately there was a marked deterioration and to me, obvious signs of glaucoma developing, another visit to my vet confirmed my worst fears. From the very first sign of a problem to this diagnosis was six days, the whole apparent development of the disease was that fast.

Squiffy was immediately referred to another practice where there is a veterinary surgeon that specialises in ocular problems. The vet spent some considerable time examining both eyes and doing several tests and procedures. Unfortunately, by this time, both eyes were significantly damaged and Squiffy was diagnosed with bilateral glaucoma. She was completely blind. We discussed at length what this meant for her future, endoscopic laser treatment was not, in this case, an option. Medication was helping to alleviate the worst of the symptoms but would never halt the disease or allow Squiffy to have any vision in the future.

At this moment in time we were faced with two possible options to consider: 1. Remove both eyes 2. Euthanasia. Our reaction to the first, for Squiffy's sake, was not an option. We had observed her being stressed, depressed, confused, reluctant to move, not coping with her blindness, lacking in confidence and being very, very frightened so keeping her alive to watch her go through this seemed heartless. This was a dog that had led a full and active life right up until these few days. To see her so unable to control her life was heartbreaking. As for the second.....

We took her home.

Having reached rock bottom emotionally, the only way is up. For Squiffy's sake we had either to find future for her or 'call it a day'. But, it turned out to be Squiffy herself who started to cope, even when we were struggling to. As each day passes we see her learning to live with her blindness. She shows us how to be positive and now it is up to us to find ways of supporting her and being positive ourselves.

Yes there are setbacks, she bumps into things, has fallen down steps, lost her way in the house and outside but she does not let these incidents hold her back. Meanwhile we have started to research how to live with a dog that cannot see and to ask people with experience for their advice. Two facts that have emerged are that in two thirds of dogs contracting glaucoma, the left eye is affected before the right and it is more common to see glaucoma in northern countries especially in winter. It was Squiffy's left eye that was affected first and this occurred during a prolonged period of extremely cold weather.

Helping her to cope has involved learning a whole host of new strategies to deal with the numerous problems facing us from finding a sound she could follow to teaching one of our other dogs to be her guide on a walk.

In conclusion, we could still be faced with the option of surgery at some time in the future but now it does not appear to be so daunting. There is a wealth of extremely useful advice and information in books and on the internet so, if anyone reading this is ever concerned about the possibility of a similar scenario with their own dog, believe me when I say it is not necessarily as bad as you may think. Do your homework and be strong for your dog. As for Squiffy, what an amazing dog!

And finally.....

We have glaucoma in Spanish Water Dogs; please **never** underestimate the importance of testing. Let us all work together in the eradication this insidious disease.



Update from 2nd March 2010-03-02

““Since this piece was written I can update you with Squiffy's progress. She has undergone two surgical procedures to remove each eye and is currently in recovery. This has allowed her to be pain free and without the discomfort the swollen eyes had given her.

Squiffy is being retrained using a number of new verbal commands in order to allow her to move around with confidence. She regularly exercises with the other dogs in the family, frequently covering up to two miles on a walk. Generally, Squiffy remains happy and does not let her disability worry her. Coping with her needs has proved to be labour intensive for her human family but we are just delighted she is still with us and we know things will continue to improve as she gains more confidence.””

Wanda Sooby