

Saying goodbye to a friend

By Tony Pearson

I've written before about my old dog Bear. The time has come for the last word.

At 3 a.m. last Tuesday morning, my wife and I were awakened by a pounding. It was Bear's head banging against the bed. He was suffering a seizure.

He hadn't been well lately. He started to slow down about a year ago, walking shorter and shorter distances and doing fewer and fewer fetches.

By the end, he had lost pretty well all the muscles in his hindquarters. The final proof came a couple of months ago, when he slipped down an embankment at a trail across a pond. He couldn't get himself turned around, and he couldn't get any traction. When I got to the bottom of the embankment, he was standing in the water, disoriented and scared to move in any direction. I pulled him onto a little patch of green sod, but he continued to panic. I had to hold him for several minutes until he calmed down.

It became obvious that he was never going to make it to the top on his own. The incline was steep, and he had nothing left in his back legs. I had to wrap my arms around his chest and haul him up a foot at a time. All the while, he howled and struggled to break free. At each pause, I had to hug his head until his fear subsided. Once he stopped struggling, it was time for the next lift. As we worked our way up, my other dog ? a big Golden Retriever named Quincy ? went back down to the pond, then came up behind Bear, and tried to push him up the hill with his nose. It didn't help, but his intentions were wonderful.

When we finally made it onto fairly level land, Bear behaved as if nothing had happened. He walked stiffly back to the car and waited as I attached the strap I used to haul him up onto the seat. He wasn't going to admit defeat. He never did.

After that, it was just a matter of time. His back legs were now completely rigid when he attempted to walk. In the house, he wandered restlessly and aimlessly. Often he fell. His sight was fading. His appetite was hit-and-miss. He tired easily, and slept an awful lot.

Later in the Tuesday pre-dawn, when a second seizure hit, we knew it was time. When morning came, we phoned the vet for an appointment. Both of us lifted him into the car. All through the ride, I stroked his muzzle; he was shaking and shivering, and his eyes were staring into space.

At the clinic, he got a tranquilizer, and the vet tech lifted him on the table. An anesthetic was administered, and we stroked his head and muzzle as he gradually drifted off. He made no noise, and his body remained relaxed throughout. His eyelids drew down. Eventually, the vet put a stethoscope to his heart, and shook his head. His body remained warm.

I watched as the vet tech lifted his lifeless body and carried it away. Bear looked for all the world like he had just fallen asleep. I held his collar and leash as we left.

When we got home, I spotted a few tufts of his fur in the living room. His water bowl and bed-cushion remained in the bedroom, and his food bowl was by the kitchen. There were a couple of bites of last night's dinner left. My wife and I cried for a long time.

As I have said before, Bear was far from a perfect dog. He was arrogant and grumpy with other dogs. He only liked riding in the car if he rode shotgun. When we drove in the country, he would bark angrily at cows, horses, sheep, and random air molecules.

Still, he had his good qualities. As a border collie, he once had great herding instincts, and was a marvel catching a Frisbee. He adored winter, romping through snowbanks. And he was gentle and patient with children.

But mostly, he loved me and my wife. He was always excited whenever we came home. He smiled at us, cuddled, and of course licked. And we loved him back, in the sloppy silly way that dog owners do.

When he and I first met and bonded (he was my first-ever dog), I told Cathy that he was going to break my heart one day. After we returned from the vet in our now-empty car, I reminded her of that. Having owned many dogs, she spoke from experience: ?A dog's leaving will always break your heart,? she said. ?But you have to realize that as it mends, it grows back larger.?

Goodbye, Bear. Your final resting place is in our hearts.