

Friends

New legs for Jack



Jack with his companions Karen MacDonald and Ivo Abraham. Inset: a model of the prosthetic transdermal implants that gave Jack four good legs.

Growing up my family always had dogs. As an adult, I wanted a dog but circumstances of graduate school, rental house, or work-related travel did not permit it. Finally, after 25 years, the time was right and when Ivo asked what kind of dog I wanted, my answer was a straightforward “shelter dog.”

But you don’t just pick a shelter animal. Sometimes they pick you. At first, Ivo was reluctant to get a disabled dog—we wanted a hiking buddy. He was even more reluctant about getting a pit bull. But the shelter was full of pit bulls and hounds. After spending four days with the dogs, Jack—an American Staffordshire Terrier mix—and I had somehow settled on each other. Ivo seemed to understand.

We didn’t know much about Jack when we adopted him. Best we could figure he was about four years old. We don’t know how he lost both his back paws, although X-rays indicate it likely happened when he was a young puppy. His records revealed he was sheltered and adopted once before; but after

two years his owner died and he was returned to the shelter. What we quickly learned was that Jack is resilient and courageous. He dispelled our stereotypical fears about his breed and taught us what a loving, affectionate and smart companion he is.

We don’t believe Jack realizes he’s disabled. He simply does the best he can with great enthusiasm. Yet, from the very beginning, he seemed to know we wanted to help and he accepted all of the gadgets and devices we employed—the two-piece harness, the ramp, the booties, the hip sling—with a smile, tail wags, and lots of licks. Jack exhibits something we can only interpret as gratitude for every meal, a soft bed, every touch and word spoken to him.

No, we don’t think Jack knows he’s disabled. He’s just a dog—a big-hearted joyful dog who takes great delight in the simple pleasures of a belly rub or

a long, pleasing roll in the grass.

Everyone is amazed that Jack walks on his two front legs, but this is strenuous for him. Although he has massively muscular shoulders and forearms (but tiny little hips and hind legs), Jack can only walk short distances before fatigue sets in. While no doubt he has adapted to his situation and maximizes his abilities, we feared that walking on his front legs would put him at risk for arthritis or shoulder injury, especially as he ages. We observed him guarding and licking his stumps and heard his cries when he would accidentally bump one of them—which we thought were signs of pain.

We began exploring ways to improve his quality of life in terms of mobility and comfort. We got Jack a dog wheelchair; we call it his chariot. He seemed to know it would help and he took to it instantly. And when you put wheels

on a strong and enthusiastic dog used to walking only on his front legs, he flies! The chariot enables him to run and go on long walks which were otherwise not possible. He gets excited whenever he hears us get his chariot out of the closet. The chariot is not feasible to use in the house, however, and it doesn’t address the pain and discomfort in his stumps.

Our search for other options led us in December 2010 to NC State University’s College of Veterinary Medicine where successful prosthetic implant surgery had been achieved for several cats and dogs with amputations. Dr. Denis Marcellin-Little confirmed that Jack was a good candidate for this still novel procedure. Jack had bilateral implant surgery this past May 1. The experimental procedure, done by only two veterinarians in the United States, offers Jack the best hope to improve his mobility, comfort and quality of life. Someday it may offer the same hope to people.

—Karen MacDonald and Ivo Abraham

