



Photo by Jaime Rowe

The Gift of Today

By Jennifer M. Brauns

In January of last year, Mike Blake noticed a bump on his best friend Jake's wrist. It was a marble-sized growth that quickly grew to the size of a golf ball. Labrador retrievers frequently develop benign tumors called lipomas and other harmless bumps, but you never know. Mike took Jake to Aspenwood Animal Hospital where his veterinarian did a biopsy. He later called to tell Mike that Jake had cancer.

Mike and Jake traveled to the Colorado State University (CSU) Animal Cancer Center in Fort Collins to see an oncologist; the prognosis was not good. Jake's growth was a malignant soft-tissue sarcoma. Soon after, Jake began a chemotherapy regimen which required weekly IV treatments for six weeks.

The tumor quickly grew to the size of a racquetball and then ruptured, requiring daily bandage changes. At this point they thought that Jake had only days or weeks left, but then suddenly the tumor began to

shrink as quickly as it had grown. The chemo was doing its job and they believed that Jake had beaten his cancer. He was nine years old at the time.

Soon after, the pair went for a walk and Jake yelped out in pain and couldn't put weight on one of his rear feet. They went to the veterinarian again who discovered that Jake had torn his Cranial Cruciate Ligament (CCL) which is like an ACL in humans. This type of injury is quite common in dog's of Jake's breed and age. The challenge was that surgery, which would normally be recommended for a torn CCL, was out of the question because Jake was still undergoing chemo treatments. With surgery ruled out, Jake's veterinarian referred them to Martin and Amy Kaufmann at OrthoPets, a Denver firm specializing in orthotic braces and prosthetic devices for animals.

Adding insult to injury, the veterinarian told Mike that when one CCL goes, the other usually follows in a few months.

Mike had Jake custom-fitted for a special stifle (knee) brace at OrthoPets to stabilize his injured leg. It only took a week from the time that Martin took Jake's leg measurements to fabricate a custom brace.

Jake doesn't need to wear his brace around the house, just when they take walks or go out on adventures as they often do. Not knowing what to expect, Mike said, "I was surprised at how fast they adapt to it (the brace). Jake started slow the first 10 or 15 steps and soon after he was oblivious to it."

Looking back and seeing how well the OrthoPets orthotic brace has been able to manage Jake's injury, Mike is thrilled that he didn't go the surgical route. Even though it was the chemotherapy that ruled surgery out, Mike would make the same decision again for an CCL tear, even if cancer wasn't involved. "The brace was a total solution. His quality of life is so much better," said Mike.

The CCL surgery would have cost around \$3,000 which Mike wouldn't have hesitated to spend, but the recovery is quite difficult. The entire first month post-surgery you have to help carry them everywhere and support them when they need to go to the bathroom. You have to be there full time through at least the first month of recovery, which wouldn't have worked out very well with Mike's job. You also have to crate them when you are not there, which Jake would not have been happy with. They can't run or walk well for a good four to six months. "The key for me is quality of life. The brace turned out to be a better option for Jake than surgery, especially since he was an older dog," Mike said.

Earlier this year Jake started favoring his other leg and an exam confirmed that he had indeed torn the other CCL. On April 3rd, Jake got his second brace from OrthoPets and did just as well with it as he did the first. "Because he only wears braces for walks, he gets really excited when he sees me get the braces out. It's like getting the leash out for other dogs. He stands really still while I strap them on, then he runs to the front door. He sees the braces as a good thing," Mike told me.

On June 19th this year, Mike discovered a growth between Jake's toes on the same leg where the tumor had been last year. The sarcoma had recurred and CSU wanted to surgically remove it the following week. This was followed up with yet another round of chemo. Around this time, Mike reluctantly delved into his childhood comic book collection and began selling issues to help pay for Jake's medical care. The first one he sold was Incredible Hulk #181 which brought \$1,200. It was hard to part with, but it made him feel good that the money was going to help Jake.

The Monday before I interviewed Mike for this story in November, Jake's vet at CSU had discovered a mass in his abdomen. An ultrasound exam showed that the cancer had spread to his spleen. His doctors and Mike are amazed that he is doing so well. He is not showing any signs of illness. He looks great and he has a good attitude. You wouldn't know he was sick.

The cancer doesn't seem to have traveled

past the spleen, so a splenectomy to remove the organ is a possible option, although there is quite a long recovery period following this type of surgery. Mike was leaning toward not putting Jake through the surgery. They will probably keep him on the chemo regimen and make sure that he has a good quality of life. They are trying to slow or stop the disease, but Jake will have cancer in some form or another with him for the rest of his life.

When Jake was diagnosed with cancer in 2009, Mike was told that he and his furry friend would only have three or four months left to spend together. Mike decided then if he only had a short time left with Jake, that he was going to make the most of it. They started visiting different parks around town and Mike took photos of Jake in front of the signs at each and every one. Mike started a blog called *That Soft Dog* which chronicled their daily activities and adventures, complete with photos so that family and friends could follow Jake's story.

Mike had been told by the staff at CSU that there was a very good chance that Jake's cancer would come back so Mike decided to live in the moment and make every day count. They have been on hundreds of journeys around town and have gone back and forth to CSU numerous times since Jake first became ill. If you've ever wondered how much money or time you would spend or how far you would go for your best friend, you should visit Mike's blog and see the hundreds of photos with Jake's smiling face all around town. The extra time that Mike and Jake have been able to share together has been priceless.

Jake is continuing with chemo treatments, although they may alter some of his medications. He is currently on a combination of oral and IV drugs. He is also participating in an experimental drug trial at CSU. They have to mix the drug for him a few days before he arrives. When he gets there, he undergoes a one hour long IV treatment. "The staff there is amazing. I have so much trust and confidence in the CSU Cancer Center people," said Mike.

When Jake became sick last year, Mike believed that he only had about 90 days

left with Jake. Ninety days turned into four or five months, then it seemed like the cancer was gone and they rejoiced. Unfortunately the cancer returned. "There is a real ebb and flow to the experience. It's really all about what you do today. Don't plan on another month or another year, just work on today," said Mike. To share another aspect of why the bond between these two is so close and special, Mike told me that his mother had passed away following a three-year illness just three weeks before Mike brought Jake home as a puppy. Even though he was grieving, there was this cool little puppy at home which made it a little easier. Interestingly, Jake came home for the first time on September 10th, 2001, the night before the Twin Towers in New York City came tumbling down. "I remember after hours and hours of watching the news that I turned the TV off and enjoyed my puppy. It really helped pull me back into reality," Mike said. Over the years, they have been through some amazing times together.

With Jake, like it was with his mother, once a diagnosis was made, the entire family made the most of every moment. They didn't fall apart. They just made the best of what time they did have. Mike has taken hundreds of photos of Jake around the city at parks, public art displays, restaurants, coffee shops, dog events and family get togethers, to name a few. Mike also assembled a list of dog-friendly restaurants and started trying to visit at least one a week with Jake, sort of a doggie bucket list.

Mike feels very lucky. What he thought was going to be a 90 day journey is still going on 22 months later. Unlike most people, Jake and Mike have gotten the most out of each and every day. It is also safe to say that when Jake's day does come, there will be no regrets. We wish Jake and Mike many more days together. Thank you for allowing us to share your story with our readers.

For more information about OrthoPets orthotic braces and prosthetic devices, please call 303-953-2545. To read Mike's blog about Jake, please visit www.thatsoftdog.blogspot.com.