

A TAIL OF TWO KATES

It was the best of litters; it was the worst of litters.

Shiffra and I have been showing and breeding Weimaraners for conformation for six or seven years and had just whelped our fourth litter. We only breed a litter of our own every year and a half or so because it takes us (and our house) that long to recover. We thought we had just delivered the easiest one yet, seven girls and a boy in just five hours. It was the first litter for our bitch, Micha, who was from the first litter out of our foundation pair. Micha was a wonderful mother. She never stepped on or laid on a puppy, had plenty of milk and she kept a meticulously clean den. We'd had a disaster with the previous litter, a puppy that endured two intussusception surgeries and then died. We thought that the universe had balanced itself and we were experiencing a healthy, trouble-free litter. Wrong.

When the pups were about ten days old, opening their eyes and just beginning to crawl, we noticed that two of the girls, green and yellow, were shaking and bouncing badly in the rear. They were flopping around like fish. We've seen enough puppies to know that this was not even close to being normal. It looked like some form of brain damage. As a few days past, the other pups developed normally but the "shakers" grew worse.

We visited our vet who recommended a local veterinary neurologist. We made an appointment and took the "Kates" to him (with deepest apologies to Katherine Hepburn, the "shakers" were now known as green Kate and yellow Kate or "the Kates").

The neurologist had never seen this syndrome in dogs before but had seen kittens with exactly the same disorder. He was visiting the vet school at UC Davis that night and would consult with five or six colleagues there.

He called the next day to report that one of his colleagues remembered an article that described this exact condition which he faxed to us later that day. The article, "Hypomyelination in Weimaraner Dogs" (*Acta Neuropathologica*), perfectly described the condition we were seeing. Our Kates had a retarded development of the myelin sheath that insulates the nerves. Without this insulation, nerve impulses are not focused. Whenever the pups were excited or trying to go somewhere, meal time for instance, the shaking became pronounced. This is known as "intention tremor".

The article mentioned that some pups in the study had grown to be normal by one year of age. The vet told us the best thing for science would be to put one Kate down for pathological study and keep the other one alive to track any improvement. We balked at putting one down and opted instead for keeping them both alive a while longer until we were more sure of what we were dealing with. This was a real gamble since the older they got, the more we grew attached. If we had to put them down later, it would be much harder.

In the mean time, we began to network with our breeder friends to see if anyone had seen this before. After lots of shrugged shoulders, one of our colleagues told us that he'd had about six pups over the years with this exact condition and they had all improved completely by the time they were four months old.

With this new hope in hand, we decided to keep them alive for a bit longer (against the advice of two breeder friends). We also agreed to keep a video record of the pups' progress, if there was any, for the UC Davis vets who were very interested in our Kates.

Within a week, first one Kate and then the other began to show improvement which convinced us that full improvement was possible. When the normal pups were ready to romp in the yard, we put the Kates right with them so they would be challenged to learn how to move. It wasn't pretty. For two or three weeks they just shook and dragged their rears around, crying pitifully. They weren't in any pain, just frustrated. They were perfectly healthy and normal in every way but one. Yellow Kate was also pretty fierce. She would camp in Shiffra's lap and defend it against all sibling intruders. If we took little

walks with the litter, Shiffra her jacket because they tired so easily. They became very spoiled being carried around like that.

We also began feeding them Omega 3 fatty acids. If you've seen the movie "Lorenzo's Oil", Lorenzo suffered from a case of deteriorating myelin while our Kates had a retarded development of the myelin. But we felt the oil couldn't hurt.

At about this same time, another Weim breeder had a litter with four shakers identical toours. She opted to euthanize and the vet who is shown at the end of "Lorenzo's Oil" flew out from the mid-west to take these pups back for pathology.

By now, we had decided that the Kates were very special and deserved a life even if it was going to be a shaky one. If they recovered enough to be placed in pet homes, fine. If not, we would keep them and provide their home. They were healthy, loving, playful, bright Weim babies who just happened to shake.

At about seven weeks, we began to grade the litter and decide which bitch to keep. Over the next few weeks, puppy buyers arrived to take home their new babies. We didn't hide the "Kates" from them. We explained their condition and mentioned that we were looking for special homes that could support them in their development. Most were novice first-time Weim owners and wanted normal pups - perfectly understandable. Then we met Bill and Carol at a show. After several conversations, we agreed to sell our second- pick bitch to them. When they arrive at our house to pick up their show puppy, Carol took one look at green Kate, her eyes filled with tears and she turned to Bill and said, "I have to have her too!" We discussed all of the information we had on her condition and green Kate (now Cricket) went with her show sister to her new, loving home.

A couple of weeks later, I got a call from Nancy. Nancy wanted a companion for herself and a three-year old standard poodle bitch but her finances were very tight. We had one other normal girl available at regular price but mentioned that yellow Kate may be available at a significant discount for the right home. Nancy came to visit and connected immediately to yellow Kate.

We arranged a payment schedule and "Grace" joined her new loving home.

Over the next months, we had occasion to see both of the Kates from time to time. Each time we saw them, it was obvious that they were continuing to improve. At seven months old, they were both just about completely normal. At one year, both are perfectly normal Weim adolescents romping and chomping and getting in trouble. In fact, Grace now runs with Nancy three miles every day.

We don't know what causes this condition. It may be viral or congenital. Hopefully the vets at work on this will provide an answer some day that will allow us to minimize or eliminate it from our breed. I just know that Cricket and Grace will always hold a special place in our hearts and should live full, happy lives. After everything, I have to say that it was a great litter. The pup we kept is a delight, several of the pups will be shown and hopefully finished and the Kates have brought immeasurable joy to two special homes.

I have to go now. I'm still trying to get the carpet back to normal....Shiffra!!...Where's the Resolve?!

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