

Splenic Hematoma

A Cautionary Tale

By Doreen Kent
December 2007

Over the years, I've heard of at least a dozen (or more) cases of Ridgebacks having emergency surgery for a splenic mass. When it's biopsied as a hemangiosarcoma, prognosis is poor. However, many times the mass is a benign hematoma. But if veterinary intervention isn't sought *immediately*, the condition can be just as deadly.

We almost lost our 6_-year-old Ridgeback, Roy, in August while we were summer-vacationing in Saratoga, N.Y.

On August 8, distress came on Roy quite suddenly. We were getting ready to go to the racetrack. I was in the bedroom attending to hair and make-up.

Bill said, "I forgot to give the dogs their peanut butter and banana treat this morning."

Our dogs produce volumes of dragon drool waiting for their morning two thick slices of banana slathered with peanut butter.

About a minute later Bill called in to me: "Roy's not taking his banana and peanut butter."

A cold chill went through me. I instinctively knew something was wrong. I've always said, "When Ridgebacks don't eat, call 911."

I went into the kitchen area. Roy was just standing there with a far-away, liquid look in his eyes. I checked his gums. They weren't white, but they were pale. I noted his abdomen a bit distended. He flinched and whimpered as I pressed my ear against his side. I could hear a squishy sound. I took his temperature - it was 98.4.

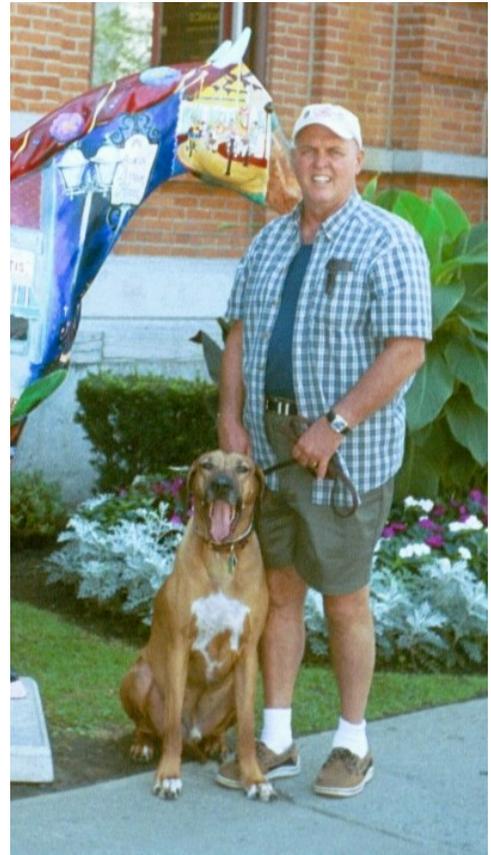
In all the time we've spent in Saratoga over the past 10 years, we've never had to seek veterinary attention. My friend and fellow Ridgeback owner who lives in the area, Nancy Oglesby, used Dr. Joy Lucas at Upstate Animal Medical Center in Saratoga Springs. Nancy was also good friends with Joy. Consequently, we got to know Joy on a social rather than a professional level.

I hit the phone and called her clinic. I introduced myself as an acquaintance of Dr. Lucas and fully explained the problems Roy was experiencing. The receptionist placed me on hold, and probably no more than a minute later, Dr. Lucas came on the line.

She said, "I'm pretty well slammed, but it sounds like you've got yourself a bonafide emergency. Bring him in right away."

I think Bill broke every speed law for the 10 miles to the vet clinic.

Perhaps you remember our loss of Jude in January 2001 at the tender age of just 4_ years old from a castration gone horribly wrong. Jude was joined at the hip to Bill. I had been married to Bill



Bill and Roy in Saratoga in 2006.

for 35 years in 2001, and it was the very first time I saw him fall apart.

Three days after Jude died, Roy and his littermates were born. It helped heal the hurt because we didn't have so much time on our hands to dwell on our grief. Mom and babies needed attention. But I could see Bill trying hard not to become attached to any of those puppies.

The **spleen** is a tongue-shaped organ located just below the stomach. Sometimes, masses grow on the spleen. Cancerous ones are **hemangiosarcomas**. Benign tumors are **hematomas**.

Even though hematomas are non-cancerous, they can rupture. Surgical removal of the spleen, if done soon enough, can avert a fatality.

When I asked him if he wanted to keep a pup from the litter, he was quick to say, "No! There's not another Ridgeback that can take Jude's place."

I gently admonished him by saying, "That's like saying today was a beautiful day, but I don't ever want to experience another beautiful day."

Perhaps my words stuck with him, because one day, when the pups were 6 weeks old and being designated to their forever homes, Bill walked into the room where I was sitting at the computer and stood behind me.

He said, "Do you think we could keep this one?"

I didn't turn around because I was afraid I would burst into tears. So, with as much casualness as I could muster, I just said, "Sure, dear. Whatever you want to do."

He said, "You don't even know which puppy it is."

Still not turning around, I said, "Of course I know which one. It's White Walls." (This is what we called Roy when he was a puppy because all his toes were white.)

"How'd you know?" Bill asked.

"Surely you must know by now that little escapes me. I caught you out of the corner of my eye paying quite a bit of attention to him."

Roy looks nothing like Jude. Roy is bigger, has a stronger, handsomer head, and he's much darker in color. But he has the exact same disposition and personality as Jude. He, like Jude, bonded himself to Bill like a stamp to a letter. It's as if when Jude was crossing over to the Rainbow Bridge, he whispered to Roy in utero, "I can't stay. You have to take care of Poppy now." Roy has been doing a bang-up job of following through with that instruction.

Fast forward six-plus years later, and this second dear dog to Bill (and to me) was at death's doorstep. I was terrified for Roy, but even more so for Bill.

Once in Dr. Lucas's office, an X-ray was quickly taken and a mass the size of a grapefruit could be seen resting on Roy's spleen. His body temperature had fallen to 96 degrees. He went into surgery less than a half-hour later. The mass had not, at that point, ruptured. Once it does, however, there is little a surgeon can do to save the dog. Time is of the essence. You can't get a dog in to the vet too quickly when a mass has grown to a bursting stage.

When they were removing the spleen and the mass growing on the side of it, it tore a bit and some blood spilled into the open cavity. Dr. Lucas did her best to clean it up, but it was more important to get Roy out of the anesthesia because he was showing signs of waking up and they didn't want to give him any more anesthesia - he had eaten a full breakfast that morning.

The operation was a success, but Roy was far from out of the woods as he was having trouble processing the spilled blood combined with the anesthesia. He was experiencing what is called PVCs - premature ventricular contractions. His heart rate was drastically abnormal. This went on for a full three days after surgery. He was shuttled back and forth between Dr. Lucas's office and the emergency clinic ten miles up the road. Everyone at both facilities was wonderful. However, the emergency-clinic vets were preparing us for Roy possibly having a fatal heart attack. They experimented with the lidocaine drip, antibiotics and other medications, but the siege lasted for three agonizing days. Each day was worse than the previous. I prayed to St. Jude and Jude to not take this precious boy from us.

Ridgebacks are strong and tough, with a will to live. Roy is relatively young and was in excellent physical condition prior to surgery. He finally rallied on the fourth day and his heartbeat returned to normal. That same day, we got word that the mass was indeed a benign hematoma, so it was one less thing to worry about. We did worry, however, about permanent heart damage.

We took Roy home and tended to his sore and swollen legs -- a result of all the IVs he had in him for so long. I gave him distilled water with homeopathic Arnica beads every four hours, and laid chamomile compresses on his poor, tender legs. He didn't eat much for three or four days, and he hadn't eaten at all while he was in the vet clinics. He lost nearly 15 of his 115 pounds. He looked awful. But after another week, his legs were pain-free and back to normal size, and he started eating again.

Two weeks later, we took him to a heart specialist in Latham, N.Y., for a heart exam and physical to make sure there was no permanent heart damage. He checked out 100 percent A-OK.

We only made about \$39 at the track during the six-week Saratoga meet. It didn't pay for much of the vet bill! But we felt like we hit a huge tri-fecta when Roy pulled out of all this with flying colors.

A few months prior to Roy's experience, we got a call from a lady in Texas who has Roy's litter sister. She reported she was fine one minute and dead the next. I'm sure that's an exaggeration, but I'm also sure that that's what it must have seemed like to her. She did not have a post-mortem exam done on the dog, which upset me terribly. But I stifled my urge to admonish her for not pursuing the issue because I knew how badly she felt. I now wonder if the same thing as Roy experienced may have been poor Pearl's problem. (Her puppy name was Flirt.)

Not trying to scare anyone, but "knowledge is power." I suggest you consult with your vet and ask whether it is prudent to add an ultrasound or X-ray to the yearly health check-up of a dog six or more years of age.

In addition to that, look for any signs that your Ridgeback is doing something different - not eating when his appetite is normally good, lethargic, tenderness to the belly, pale gums, lowered temperature. Any of these signs should prompt you to get your Ridgeback to the vet ASAP.

How fortunate that Bill forgot to give the dogs their morning treat that day. Had he done so, we would have left for the track and probably come home several hours later to a dead dog or one too far gone for any help.

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