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the
joy
issue

*Nail clipping
can be a snap*

*Do you know
if your dog is
happy?*

*Five pups who
beat the odds*



*Dog Writers Association
of America*



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A basketball was one tool the team used to get the pups used to standing on their own.

With a Single Step

The pups became paralyzed overnight. Was there any way to save them?

By Mara Bovsun

One day, Gail Gilbert's new puppy was acting like a typical 9-week-old yellow Labrador Retriever, full of energy and mischief. Then everything changed.

"He went from being a normal dog to being a completely paralyzed blob of Jell-O on the floor in like 10 hours," says Gilbert.

Gilbert feared that the pup's condition was the result of something she had done. She was afraid to call the breeder—Cindy Nauer, of Marengo, Illinois.

She took her pup to two vets and a veterinary neurologist. They all voiced a similar opinion.

No idea what's wrong. If he doesn't get better, put him down.

Gilbert finally worked up the courage

to call Nauer, who had some shocking news: Other pups from the litter were having similar issues.

That's when Gilbert, a professional filmmaker, got the cameras rolling. The result is *Puppy Love*, a 76-minute documentary that is heartwarming, uplifting, and an instructional video on doing whatever it takes to save someone you love.

Courtesy Gail Gilbert



Two pups—White and Shooter—could do nothing but sleep under a blanket. Even eating and drinking was a struggle.

Boys Down

“They were gorgeous pups,” recalls Penny Kurz, who was at Nauer’s home when they were born and had been helping to raise them.

A few weeks later, she paid them a morning visit to play and give them a little exercise. That night, Nauer called her.

“What did you do with my puppies?” she asked. Kurz said she just walked around the house with them a few times.

“Well, they can’t get up the stairs now,” Nauer told her.

By the following day, when Kurz went to visit, the puppies could not move.

Then came a call from the woman in Nebraska who had purchased one of the males. Her pup, Dillon, was paralyzed too. Her veterinarians conducted exams, ran tests, and took histories of the pup’s activities. They had no answers.

The mysterious condition had hit five pups from the litter—all the males—and no one had any explanations. The

two females had no problems.

One theory was a vaccine reaction. The pups had received their distemper shots about seven days earlier. Another thought was a possible genetic defect. Still, another possibility was coonhound paralysis, a violent immune reaction to an irritant such as raccoon saliva.

A vet suggested that the culprit might have been a microbe they all picked up while they were playing in the yard. That might explain why the symptoms were seen only in the males. Females develop a more robust immune system earlier than their brothers.

“We just didn’t know,” says Michelle Cullen, a tracking teacher who was also helping with the litter.

Euthanasia was the blanket veterinary recommendation, but it was not a step the women were willing to take. These pups were too special. Nauer was a highly respected breeder, with more than four decades in Labs. In 2016,

AKC honored her as Breeder of the Year in Tracking. But Nauer, who was getting older and dealing with her husband’s serious illness, said this was to be her last litter.

Gilbert had already started recording the heartbreaking images, figuring that the pups were going to die. When the women decided there was no way they were going to let them go without a fight, Gilbert brought in a crew to film what had become a desperate rescue mission.

“Everybody was coming up with their own weirdo solution without any kind of blueprint,” Gilbert recalls. She said she started shooting just “because I couldn’t believe we were doing these crazy things.”

Chicken Soup

In her half-century of breeding and competing with Labrador Retrievers, Nauer had access to a large community

of experts—other breeders; traditional, holistic, and integrative vets; and veterinary chiropractors—to call on for ideas.

Four of the pups returned to Nauer's home. Dillon remained in Nebraska, where his owner started working with a holistic vet.

Desperate to save the puppies, Kurz, Cullen, Gilbert, and Amanda Marien, one of Gilbert's colleagues, leaped into the round-the-clock task.

The first step was super nutrition—raw feeding, vegetable stews, Chinese herbs, homeopathic treatments, and anything else that might help.

When the pups were having trouble eating, one of Gilbert's friends suggested chicken soup. Gilbert ran home and started boiling chicken carcasses. "I went from never having made chicken soup to four batches a week," she recalls.

Sparkling a Movement

Physical therapy was critical. Use it or lose it is not just a saying; it's a hard fact of life, especially where muscles are concerned.

Draping pups over basketballs gave



Water therapy on a treadmill helped build leg muscles.

them a sense of what it feels like to stand. Slings fashioned out of tote bags supported the dogs as they took their first tentative steps. Aqua therapy in beautiful lakes, pools, and underwater treadmills was added to the program.

Massage and chiropractic treatments aided in recovery and flexibility.

Similar regimens have helped pups survive "swimmer puppy syndrome," a condition for which euthanasia has long been considered the kindest action.

Swimmer pups have heavy bodies and bones, a broad chest, and short legs, and they cannot support their bodies. Their legs splay out to the side, and they propel themselves with a snakelike or walrus-swimming motion, sometimes dragging themselves with their heads.

The conventional wisdom is that there is little hope for a swimmer. But that's not always the case.

In a breed column in our sister publication, *AKC Gazette*, Clumber Spaniel breeder Bryant Freeman, Ph.D., pointed out that with human intervention, swimmer puppies can lead normal lives. Freeman wrote that physiotherapy had to be consistent and repeated several times daily.

"Motion," he wrote, "is lotion."

Action Figures

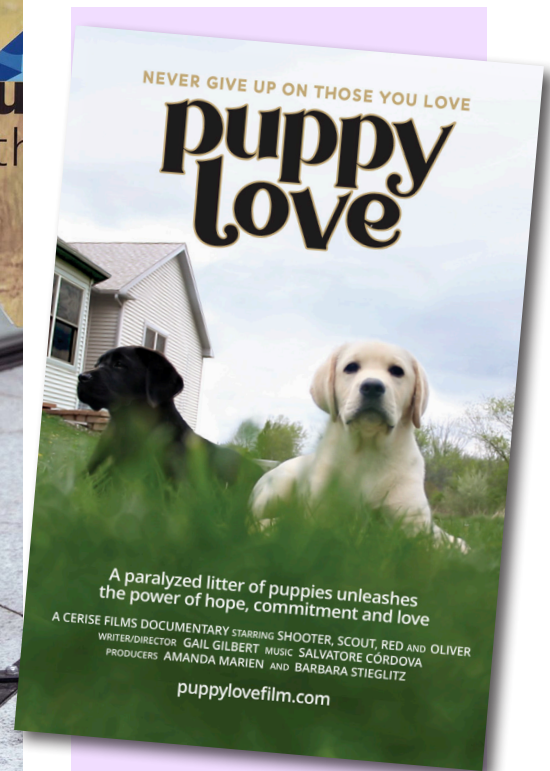
Two pups—Scout, a yellow, and Red, a black—started to bounce back in about five to six weeks. Soon, they were



Makeshift slings supported puppies as they took their first tentative steps.



Gail Gilbert and Scout share a moment at the AKC Museum of the Dog. The museum hosted a screening of the movie over the summer. The pups celebrated their 12th birthday this year.



Puppy Love (follow on [Instagram](#)) is available on demand at Prime Video, Apple TV, and Google Play.

scampering with their sister, Cheddar, Nauer's pick of the litter and one of two females who had not been affected. Out in Nebraska, Dillon was also coming along well.

Shooter and White were hit the hardest. The pair could not move for the first couple of weeks. They stayed nearly motionless on their beds, looking more like floppy plush toys than living creatures. Everything, even breathing and eating, was a struggle. Their throat muscles were so weak they had to get nourishment through IVs and syringes.

White's legs became rigid and malformed because of the lack of exercise. Several times, the pup's condition declined, and it seemed like it would be kinder and more sensible to let him go. Veterinarians could then conduct a necropsy to try to figure out what caused the condition in the first place.

Spoiler Alert

Not to give too much away, but no dogs die in this movie.

Within a year, four of the pups looked fine; their struggle to survive was behind them, and they were achieving titles in challenging sports.

Even White, so weak he seemed doomed, recovered and attained the lofty goal of leading a normal Labrador life—running in fields, jumping into lakes, playing, and being adored by humans.

Tracking expert Cullen fell in love with White's spirit, renamed him Oliver, and took him home despite the physical reminders of his rough start. His front feet turn out, giving him a funny gait that resembles the Little Tramp of silent film star Charlie Chaplin. To participate in sports like rally and obedience, Cullen called upon some unique skills she honed as a child. "I used to do Irish dancing for

years, competitively," she says.

Dancing gave her flexible feet, and it was easy for her to mimic the movement of her four-legged partner. When the judge says, "Are you ready?" she turns out her feet so that they look like Oliver's. "Then I can walk like him."

Although he may lack grace, Oliver excels in another area—scenting ability. This skill earned Oliver, who passed away at 12 1/2 in July, a Champion Tracking Dog title. It also made him a community hero, finding lost cats in the neighborhood. Admirers called him the "Great Kitty Finder."

The owners of the missing cats hardly noticed his odd gait. "They don't look at him like he's twisted," says Cullen. "They look at him like he's this incredible tracking dog that gets out there." **FD**