

A Snow Ball's Chance.....

By Dan Durbin

As owners of Hillside Springs Hunt Club and Kennel in Edgerton, Wisconsin, Andy Walton and his wife Judy are no strangers to new litters of Labrador retrievers. Back in 2006, his batch of golden-yellowish labs were acting like most do....Yipping, sleeping, and just plain living the puppy life. But there was one that just seemed a bit slower than the rest. He didn't open his eyes as quickly as his brothers and sisters. He didn't learn to walk as soon. Heck, he even looked different, a long legged, gangly 'ugly ducking'. Walton noticed that quite often, he wouldn't even wake up despite all the other puppies going nuts and making a racket after hearing their master come into the room.

"I suspected then that Snow Ball was deaf," Walton said. "After conducting

some tests on my own I was pretty sure of it, but I had my veterinarian confirm it. Snow Ball had been born without any of the hairs on his inner ear canal that detect vibration. I was hoping the little guy just had some blockage but instead found out that there was nothing I could do."

Named for his white coat that stood out from the rest, Snow Ball would never hear, but as Walton would soon find out-happiness with the dog was not measured in decibels.

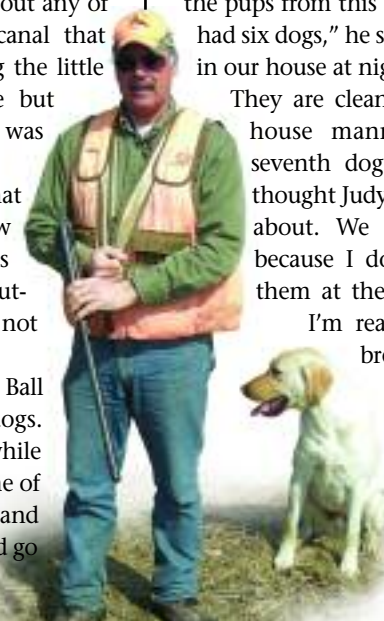
It didn't take long for Snow Ball to fit in with the other dogs. When the pups were let out while Snow Ball was still sleeping, one of his littermates would go back and nudge him so he'd wake up and go

play with the rest of them.

"We hadn't intended on keeping any of the pups from this litter since we already had six dogs," he said. "And they all stay in our house at night. It's not bad really.

They are clean dogs with excellent house manners. But adding a seventh dog wasn't something I thought Judy would be too excited about. We have a lot of dogs because I do some guiding with them at the hunt club for birds.

I'm really only a part time breeder and trainer to be honest. But I like having a lot of dogs around so I can match them up to the style of hunting



my client's want. Plus, I never overwork a dog because I have so many to choose from."

Lucky for Snow Ball, what he didn't have in hearing he made up for in charm; and, his sense of smell, as Walton was soon to find out.

"I was walking the pups about 100 yards away from where I keep my pheasants penned," he said. "Off the back of the house is a small vent that comes from the birds. We got to one spot and Snow Ball caught a whiff of those birds and went nuts. The other puppies didn't even smell a thing. I knew from the get go that I would never put the dog down for having a defect, but it was then that I decided I would keep him for sure and try to train him."

Walton considers himself a "soft trainer" and never hits his dogs. He only uses e-collars sparingly, and primarily uses them in a page or vibration mode. He also never bribes dogs with treats.

"I believe that dogs are born with a strong desire to please you," he said. "I believed this even more when I started training Snow Ball. Everything we did had to be on sight, not sound, so I had to pay attention to how he paid attention. You could just see how he was watching every move and even the expression on my face trying to figure out what he was supposed to do. I don't like using electricity with a dog much because I don't want them responding to pain and misuse of it can break a dog's spirit. I don't use treats because I think that when they obey



due to food; they are just doing so to please themselves. I really believe that dogs want to please their owner. They just need to figure out what you want them to do. This can be accomplished by being aware of your dog and staying consistent with your commands and actions."

Still, without verbal commands, an e-collar was a must.

"It was especially true when he was a pup," he said. "If he flushed a bird that flew toward a road or other dangerous area, I needed a way to get his attention to give him the stop or come command. The collar was perfect for that."

Walton found Dogtra to make the best collar for such a reason. He wanted one that was compact and lightweight because Snow Ball was going to have to wear it a lot at a young age and it had to have a vibrate mode.

"I also took off the standard probes it came with and replaced them with some I modified so that they didn't irritate his skin" he said. "I really think of collars more of an insurance policies if your dog is about to run in the street and meet the





grill of a truck. But with Snow Ball, the vibration on the collar replaced a whistle, so I used it a lot when he was younger. Now that he understands what I want him to do, I rarely use it. He frequently looks back at me on his own so I can give him hand signals when needed.”

While most people would think that training a deaf dog would be extremely difficult, Walton said it wasn’t as bad as many would think.

“One of the hardest parts was just developing hand signals that were different from what my other dogs are used to,” said Walton. “You don’t want Snow Ball releasing when I’m signaling another dog. He’s relying solely on sight so his signals needed to be independent. He eventually caught on real well and responds great.”

For instance, Walton likes to test out just how trained his dogs are by verbally saying commands to his hearing dogs that are similar, but not the same, as his command. Instead of “Play” for a release command, he might say “Clay” or “Prey” and see if anyone moves.

Most times they don’t.

For Snow Ball, the little game might mean moving two fingers on his hand to release him instead of four.

“I have fun with them,” he said. “My dogs are all happy.”

It has been reported by many people that lose a certain sense that other ones fire up with a rage. Maybe a blind person can hear a feather hit the ground. Perhaps a person with no hearing can see like a hawk.



“That’s how I feel about Snow Ball,” he said. “That dog can see stuff that is just amazing. And his nose is as good or better than any dog I have trained. I use him a lot for going after wounded birds that other dogs lose. He’ll go in and put us right on them even if the birds have moved 200 yards or more from where the hunters say they went down.”

And even though Snow Ball has become an ace in the field, Walton says that he just likes having the pooch around. He’s outgrown his ‘ugly duckling’ appearance and turned into quite a handsome and athletic specimen.

“I don’t think there’s a perfect dog on the entire planet,” he said. “For Snow Ball it’s his hearing, but maybe for another dog it’s his personality. Maybe there’s a gene that’s out of whack that you might never know about. No, I would not breed Snow Ball, but that doesn’t mean he’s less valuable to me. I like having him around. He’s just a happy dog with a ton of character.” 🐾