



Chariots of fire

For dogs with CDRM, a set of wheels can give them the freedom to enjoy life to the full. Two of Jim's dogs were affected – but he made sure they didn't suffer

Jim Colla

In January of 1996 I had three incredibly healthy German Shepherd Dogs. Prince, almost 11, Sabre, who was Prince's son, then coming up for nine and Lady a spayed rescued bitch aged three and a half.

During a regular walk on Wimbledon Common, I noticed that while Prince and Lady were, as usual, jumping over fallen trees, Sabre was walking around them. This was not normal behaviour for the lunatic Sabre and it caused me to look more closely. He was limping very slightly on his left leg. "Probably trodden on something," I thought while making a mental note to take him to the vets if he was still limping in a couple of days. He was, so I took him.

The initials CDRM meant nothing to me. I rejected it as a

diagnosis as being impossible. Not my Sabre, not this huge, fit wonderful dog. They had got it wrong, there must be a simpler explanation. A couple of referrals later, a long telephone call with a friend in GSD Welfare and I realised it was CDRM and the prognosis was not good. A matter of months, most said.

A fine balance

A cart had been suggested for when he could no longer use his back legs. I had immediately rejected this. It wouldn't be fair for him, but how do you know what he will consider fair? I filed the idea away.

If this was a degenerative condition affecting the nerves, how about a spinal injuries unit? I telephoned one. The nurse I spoke to suggested a physio-

therapist and found me one in Hemel Hempstead. Though having never treated a CDRM patient she spoke with the vet and worked out a series of simple exercises.

We arrived for our first session early. Sabre staggered every few steps, tripped and fell. The look of puzzlement was agonising. As he attempted to squat he would suddenly fall backwards. It tore me apart watching him. He needed to improve his base of support. There was a tendency to stand with both paws together

as though balancing on the tip of a triangle. He had lost feeling in the left leg and with it awareness of where that leg was. His muscles needed strengthening. The physiotherapist said I should do the exercises five to six times a day with him. Sabre staggered off.

On our return the following week he walked without falling once. Over the weeks he got better and better until she said she no longer needed to see us, but to continue with the exercises.

Pooled resources

A friend's wife telephoned to say that, although she told very few people, she was a faith healer. Though terrified of dogs, GSD's in particular, would I like her to try to help Sabre? I would have accepted help from any quarter and said yes. Sabre's first few visits to her were not a success. Though very friendly and loving of a fuss, her touch clearly disturbed him (I now realise this to be a good sign). He would move away from her after just a minute. Try as she did, he only allowed her a minute or so before moving away. Over the weeks the periods grew until he would go over and lie at her feet. As she placed her hands above him he would let out a great sigh of contentment and go into a deep sleep for exactly 20 minutes.

Though he could walk it was an odd gait that twisted the left rear paw and caused it to bleed. He was in fact creating almost his own pad on the side of the foot. All types of dog boots were tried without success. In the end it was down to begging friends for old socks. Neighbours scoured the charity shops. My sock pile grew.

Prince had been suffering with arthritis for a couple of years. In September of 1996 the vet examined Prince and said, "I am sorry to have to say this but I think Prince also has CDRM. The arthritis symptoms have masked the onset of it." Having arthritis there was no way we could manipulate the

I ordered a cart and when it arrived took the other two out of the room and put Prince into it. He stood for a few minutes and then howled. "There, I knew it wouldn't work," I said, taking him out. It was put up in the loft

Prince, Sabre and Lady after a game in the park



joints with physiotherapy as we had Sabre's. Prince began to slowly decline. We still took them out every day but the walks were now shorter. I ordered a cart and when it arrived took the other two out of the room and put Prince into it. He stood for a few minutes and then howled. "There, I knew it wouldn't work," I said, taking him out. It was put up in the loft. The company said it would take about a fortnight of perseverance to get him to accept it. I felt he never would.

We found a hydrotherapy pool at Stokenchurch and took them all. Sabre hated it. Lady ran around the pool barking but Prince loved it. He would swim around with a yellow floating bone in his mouth for the entire 20 minutes. Eventually I used to take him on his own twice a week. One day while watching him swimming I realised he was only using his front legs. He had realised that with the floatation device he didn't need to use his rear legs so while his front half was like Arnold Schwarzen-shepherd the rear was not really being helped.

By April of 1998 Prince could

only manage half a dozen steps without falling down again. We would drive to the common, let Sabre and Lady out and then I would hold Prince's tail, not holding him up by it but counterbalancing him. As he started to go down on the left I would turn his tail to the right and he could stay up those few extra steps. He was so brave and tried so hard but he was fighting a battle neither of us could hope to win. I decided with

I decided with a heavy heart that we would try him again in his cart and if he never took to it, which I firmly believed he wouldn't, he would have to be put to sleep for this simply was not fair on him

a heavy heart that we would try him again in his cart and if he never took to it, which I firmly believed he wouldn't, he would have to be put to sleep for this simply was not fair on him.

On a Saturday morning leaving Sabre and Lady at home I took Prince to the common. We fitted him into the cart and clipped a lead on in case he panicked and ran off. His eyes were fastened on the ball I held, it was his favourite possession. I did a couple of make-believe throws to get him excited and then threw it down the path. He was gone.

Two weeks to get used to the cart? More like two seconds. He took to it like he had been born in

one. Grabbing his ball he went to turn when a five-month-old GSD bitch passed him. This 13-year-old Casanova was flying along after her. I could not believe it. After ten minutes or so I left him with a friend and ran back to the car to fetch Sabre and Lady. This would be the next test. How would they take to him in a cart and he to them? On my return they spotted each other and ran to meet. The cart got a quick inspection and sniff then they were off like in the good old days.

Prince was a highly intelligent member of the GSD community and as such he loved a game. Long before CDRM I had devised a game whereby we would separate on any mown grass surface, steal Sabre's ball and then throw it across the grass between us. Sabre would be feinting right and left trying to guess which side the ball would pass him. Prince had joined in on the first occasion. By the second time he had figured it out and simply stood in the middle. The ball would have to pass him and he would then dribble it away until Sabre got

there. It was a game we hadn't played for years. Would he remember it? Could he play it in the cart?

You bet. He got it wrong for the first couple of times. He would be facing in the wrong direction watching the game over his shoulder but then the penny dropped. Parking the cart in the middle he would rush after the ball, to assist we tailored our speed to his now reduced rate. Still dribbling it he would watch out for Sabre rolling along before parking the cart on top of the ball. We never ever let on that we could have just taken it from beneath him but always let him keep it once it was there. On Sabre's arrival he would move backwards and then let Sabre take the now exposed ball.

People would stop and ask about the cart. We had very few adverse comments because just looking at him one could see how happy he was.

Occasionally I would be offered a redundant cart by somebody whose dog had died. I

We fitted him into the cart and clipped a lead on in case he panicked and ran off. His eyes were fastened on the ball I held, it was his favourite possession. I did a couple of make believe throws to get him excited and then threw it down the path. He was gone

began collecting these and loaning them out to people who could not afford to buy them. In this way I had placed a few dogs in wheels and all of them had taken to them enthusiastically. I found and joined an e-mail community Degen Myelopathy@onelist.com which was a group of people who owned or had owned dogs with this illness (DM being the American term for the illness).

The group also have a website: www.angelfire.com/mi/dmroster/index.html

At the point of my joining most of the members were very much anti cart due to a bad experience by one member. When I started telling them the carting stories and sending out pictures the questions came thick and fast. Eventually one of them decided to try what I was saying and ordered a cart from Eddies Wheels in the USA. On receiving it she e-mailed me for advice and eventually we spoke on the phone as I led her



before fastening this to him at night. This went on for three months until the vet asked if we could take him out of the cart for a heart-check. I apologised as he peed on the floor. "Oh don't worry. His bladder will be full. I'll empty it for him." With that she gently squeezed around his stomach and he peed into a bowl. It transpired that he was not incontinent but had lost the ability to work his own bladder. I was so upset to think that he had laid in agony for months with us thinking he was incontinent. After asking that I be shown what to do I took care of that department for him. We had Prince's peeing spots and he was dry after that.

In May of 1999 I took Prince out for his early morning pee and it was blood. At 14 years of age his kidneys were failing. We rushed him to the vet and knew it was time to say a very sad goodbye to an incredibly courageous old boy. I drove him to Ongar where he was cremated. The following week a young girl telephoned to say she had been given my num-

ber by the Blue Cross. Did I have a cart to fit her 12-year old GSD bitch Misty. I said I had a cart, but didn't know whether or not it would fit. We drove to Highgate. The resemblance to Prince was uncanny. The cart almost fitted. Misty took to it immediately and like a little old lady in a pair of shoes that were really too big she was off across

The cart almost fitted. Misty took to it immediately and like a little old lady in a pair of shoes that were really too big she was off across Waterlow Park. It was as though Prince was there showing her what to do

Waterlow Park. It was as though Prince was there showing her what to do. A group of tourists visiting Karl Marx's tomb stopped to watch her pass. When I said it was her first go at it they all cheered her.

Four weeks after Prince died Sabre had a stroke which paralysed one of his front legs. We tried in vain for

a week to try to save him but it was hopeless. He could not stand on his own. This was worse than losing Prince. I had time to sit with him and talk to him knowing it would be the last time. I stroked his head and looked right into his eyes as he went. "Go find Prince, Sabe, he is waiting for you in the forest by the lake." I took him to

through the procedure to ensure successful acceptance. Later that day I downloaded my letters and there was Shana, proudly in her cart with a near hysterical letter from Debbie saying how happy she was and how wonderful it was to see Shana walking again. Following that the carts snow-balled, Florida, Buffalo, Texas all of them sending thank you letters for encouraging them to try a cart.

Reunited

Prince had become incontinent, or so we were told. We dealt with it by laying plastic sheeting on the floor with cut up washing machine size blankets and bought lots of strong disinfectant. Sometimes he would do a low howl during the night and I would say, "Oh shut up you silly old fool." I bought men's incontinence underpants, cut them up the side seam so the pad would go sideways and fitted nappy booster pads in them



Prince and Sabre's Poem

Sabre joined his Dad today,
We are sad and miss him so.
His time on earth was over,
We just had to let him go.

We held him and we hugged him
as he quickly slipped away,
to leave a useless shell behind him,
while Sabre sped off to play.

Perhaps old Prince was lonely.
He was always the cunning one,
maybe he tricked an angel
into coming to fetch his son.

I know they are now together
though much sooner than was fair.
I'll remember them forever,
an irreplaceable, wonderful pair.

With luck they'll find a forest,
with a river, lake and stream,
take the walks we once took together,
of which we can now only dream.

I hope they are both happy
and although I am filled with despair,
I know that some day I'll be smiling
when I think of that wonderful pair.

One day they'll see us coming
and towards us they will race.
No pills, no wheels, no bandages
to slow their breakneck pace.

But for now there's only the memories
of the good times we once knew
with our magnificent German Shepherds.
I'm so glad we knew you two.

Jim Colla, June 11 1999

Prince April 23 1985 to May 7 1999
Sabre April 9 1987 to June 11 1999

Birmingham Gam



Ongar to be with his Dad and wrote the poem opposite.

I still belong to the e-mail community and I still put dogs on wheels for people who cannot afford to buy the carts. It is a pity that so many vets see euthanasia as the only answer to CDRM. Devastating though the illness is, I

would go through it all again if I had to because it brought us so much closer. I cared for my two old soldiers for more than three years. We met the problems together and dealt with them together. Through this stinking illness I have met a whole cyber community sharing and exchanging information. Few of us have met in person,


yet all feel the joy and the sadness that comes from reading that day's mail. Through me, a woman in South Shields, loaned a cart to a dog in Coventry whose owner she had never met and a woman in Texas gave a cart to a woman in

Canada she had never met.

Two weeks ago I took a cart to a village just outside of Barnsley. They had seen an article about me by sheer chance. Somebody had been scrunching up the *Weekly News* to light a fire when they spotted the picture of Misty in her cart. I arrived about seven at night. We

put their dog in the cart and she was fidgeting as I adjusted it. The woman looked anxiously on as the dog got more agitated. I said that we should give her a go in the cart so she understood and then I would adjust it some more.

When they reached for her lead she screamed. "She hasn't been out for a walk for four months," said her

owner. Within minutes we were all running along the road in a desperate effort to keep up with her as she flew along screaming with happiness. They tell me she is still screaming every time they get the lead. 

Through me, a woman in South Shields, loaned a cart to a dog in Coventry whose owner she had never met and a woman in Texas gave a cart to a woman in Canada she had never met



Whitney