

*"Blessed is the person who has earned the love of an old dog."* – Sydney Jeanne Seward

### **The Seniors**

I don't remember when my hair first started turning gray; or when those forty pound feed bags started feeling so heavy; or "take them round twice please" made me groan. It seems that I've arrived at the same spot that Reveille has . . . we're both *seniors*.

"Reva" is 14 now. By old fashioned calculations that makes her 98. Please note no mention of my age here, but we're both slowing down for sure. There's her grizzled muzzle and my gray hair. When did that happen! These days construction workers whistle at my dogs, the baggers at my local super market call me "maam" and waiters never bat an eyelash when I order from the Senior menu (all a true disappointment!).

According to Amy Shojai's book "Complete Care For Your Aging Dog," 40% of all pet owners today have an animal aged seven or older. There have been many advances in veterinary care and pharmaceuticals to account for this statistic, as well as improved home care by educated owners. Canines now benefit from improved diets created just for seniors, along with veterinary care directed toward the aging dog, and closer 'in home' associations with caregivers.

Aging canines develop diseases similar to human seniors—such as senility, cataracts, arthritis, diabetes and cancer. You may have to make adjustments in routines or diet to accommodate for the changes. Special attention needs to be paid to vision, hearing, liver and kidney function and personality changes. However, don't think for a minute that your old age pensioner isn't up for a walk, a swim or some socializing in the park. These are the things that keep them going physically and emotionally . . . just like humans. With continued introduction of new medicines, remedies and surgical procedures, our dogs are living longer. It's typical for large dogs to live eight to ten years. It's not uncommon for our Labradors to live well into their twelfth year. Many Labradors defy their ages by remaining competitive into their double-digit years. We often see ten-year-old Labradors winning an Open stake at a field trial, or a Veteran still outshining those youngsters at our

breed specialties. Some are simply blessed with good health; others need a bit more of our attention to keep them in optimum condition.

Here is a list of some things you can do to prolong the health of your aging Labrador: (1) Pay attention to water intake, or changes in eating or bowel habits that would indicate kidney or liver failure. Discuss any changes with your veterinarian. (2) Feed a top quality product made for senior dogs. Feeding less of your regular food is not wise as it will allow for weight loss but may deprive your dog of adequate vitamins and minerals. Science has shown that overweight canines live an average of two years less than dogs maintained at a lower weight. (3) Some older dogs develop an Alzheimer-like condition called canine cognitive dysfunction. They may get lost in familiar surroundings, soil in the house or simply stand in the middle of the yard and bark at some nonexistent intruder. Anipryl, manufactured by Pfizer, has been proven to keep some dogs more mentally alert which seems to give them a bit more zest for life. (4) Glucosamine products, vitamin C, vitamin E and vitamin B complex along with an occasional pain reliever tablet all may have their place in the care of your older Labrador, but discuss them with your veterinarian. (5) Old dogs should be housedogs whenever possible and have a comfortable spot to call their own. Be sure to have cushy dog beds for your oldster and place them in a draft-free location. Consider baby gates to protect your dog from stairs or from soiling a precious carpet. If steps are a necessity, consider a ramp from house to yard. When it's not possible to bring your old dog inside, adequate shade, fans and cooling or heating systems will make him more comfortable. (6) Don't be impatient with your dog's slower pace and never scold for misdeeds. Our state of mind is important for our senior's state of well being. (7) Don't think it silly to give him a massage to help stimulate circulation. An added bonus may be the early discovery of lumps and bumps that would need a vet's attention. Some owners of older dogs have a regular "spa" day to groom and check ears, trim toenails, inspect teeth and gums or clean anal glands. Your old fellow will love all the fuss. (8) Think preventative. Consider semi-annual blood panels to check liver and kidney function and urine and stool analysis. Sometimes the smallest problem in a senior dog can turn into a disaster.

Labrador Retrievers are such amenable dogs that we breeders tend to be "collectors." (Few of us have only one.) Often the retired dog gets "short-changed" in attention by a younger dog. Whenever possible, think ahead. When your Labrador has reached the goals you've set, reward them with "only child" status by giving them a permanent position in your home. If they haven't already been indoor dogs and you can't do so at this point, consider placing them in a loving, responsible home. As hard as it sounds and actually is, giving them their own family is the kindest thing we can do for our old ones if we can't make them part of ours.

*Buckstone Reveille, who was owned and bred by Kendall Herr and myself, died just a few months short of her 15th year. She was out of the first litter produced by Ch Dickendall Arnold. From three very small litters, Reva produced a conformation pointed Junior Hunter who produced several conformation champions with working titles and a Master Hunter who in turn produced a Junior Hunter. She was a quiet, gentle dog to the end, the caretaker of her children and grandchildren and my children and grandchildren.*

Faith Hyndman

12/14/04