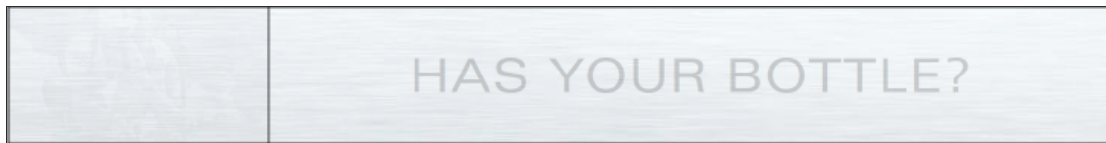


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Tyler Tunes: Tribute to Tugboat

By Tyler Hamilton, Phonak Hearing Systems professional cycling te
 Posted Jul. 22, 2004



Tugboat and Tyler
 Photo: Tim DeWaele

Back in 1995, my parents owned a dog named Bosun. They bred him with a female named Baby. Tugboat was the pick of their litter. I chose him because he was the most animated of all the puppies. Quite often, Baby's owner would find Tugboat out of the puppy kennel and perched on its roof. He was an entertainer, even at a few weeks old.

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When Tugs was born back in Massachusetts, I was living in Colorado. When he was old enough to be separated from Baby and his eight siblings, he spent a brief hiatus at my parents' home in Marblehead. A couple weeks later he was loaded onto a plane, all by himself, headed for Denver. It would turn out to be the first of his many trips across the country.

Bike racers generally don't have dogs. Especially bachelor bike racers, which I was back then. But I had just bought my first house, and wasn't so sure at that time where the bike-racing thing was heading. In my mind, it was almost a fluke that I had morphed from collegiate cycling to the pro ranks. I thought my lucky breaks had probably run their course and that I'd be settling down in Colorado before too long.

As the months passed and the racing calendar heated up, Tugboat and I started living out of our suitcases fairly consistently. I would head off to the races and Tugs would shack up at a friend's house. I was lucky because Boulder has always been a dog-friendly town. And I had lots of friends who were willing to take him in while I was away. It was a pretty good system.

Then a few big changes impacted our lives. First, the team I was riding for, Montgomery Bell, got a new sponsor - the U.S. Postal Service. There were big plans for this organization to go to Europe and ride in the Tour de France. That meant the better part of 1996 was going to be spent on the road in the U.S. and going back and forth to Europe so we could prove ourselves as a developing team. Tugs and I were spending more time apart than together.

Then, a girl named Haven came on the scene just before Tugboat's first birthday. She had grown up with a cat and a goldfish and had been chased by a neighbor's dog when she was a kid. So the odds of her and Tugboat hitting it off were a little slim at first. But together, we eased her into dog life. Our first challenge was convincing her that golden retrievers weren't vicious. Our second was getting her to pet Tugboat with more than her fingertips for a millisecond. It was slow going, but she came around. Tugboat could charm the socks off of just about anyone.

1997 was my first full season in Europe. Haven was working in Boston, Tugboat was staying with my family in Marblehead, I was living in Girona, and friends were renting my house in Colorado. Our lives stayed this way until 2000 when Haven moved over to Europe. We hesitated about bringing Tugs over at first, because we worried that the 15 hours of crated travel to Europe would be inhumane. So he remained in Marblehead in-season, and then came to live with us in the off-season. This situation made Tugboat kind of a family dog. But he never seemed to mind all the



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transitioning. He just rolled with the venue changes as if he understood that my career required him to do so.

Finally in 2002 we decided the in-season separation was too much. His place was with us on the road, wherever that led. So we loaded him up in his all-too-familiar crate that had shuttled him between Colorado and Massachusetts so many times and brought him with us to Spain.

The airline we chose made us fly him in cargo instead of baggage, which meant we had to pick him up in a different terminal. The flight arrived just before 6 p.m. We made a mad dash to the cargo terminal and arrived there by 6:35 - only to find out that the cargo office closed at 6:30. They wouldn't let us pick Tugs up until 10 a.m. the next morning when the processing office re-opened. We were horrified.

We protested and pleaded. My wife even cried. But they didn't care. But they did agree to let us see him and let him out for a walk around the cargo warehouse, which looked like the inside of a Home Depot. Tugs was pretty happy to be released and immediately relieved himself at the end of an aisle of shelves holding boxes of pricey imports. We practically cheered, but we couldn't because we were laughing too hard. Tugs was a trouper. He had to spend his first night in Europe in a cargo warehouse, and he accepted the challenge like a champ.

Tugboat was one of the largest dogs in Girona. Reactions to him were always mixed. Sometimes kids and adults would scream and run from him like they had just seen a two-headed monster. But there were just as many others that warmed instantly to him. Like the lady across the street from our house who owns a café. She always had a slice of queso ready for Tugs. In fact, it was hard to get him back in the house if he didn't get his customary treat.

I think Tugboat liked his vagabond life. Unlike dogs who live in one house and walk around the same block three times a day for their entire lives, he enjoyed a variety of experiences in his nine years. He traveled extensively in the U.S. and Europe. He covered a lot of ground in New England, and out west. And overseas he visited Spain, France, Belgium, Italy and Monaco. He traveled through the Dolomite Mountains with us while I previewed stages for the 2002 Giro d'Italia. He drove nearly the entire route of the 2003 Tour de France. He ran through fields in the Pyrénées and Alps. He swam in the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea.

Aside from his travels Tugboat also got to do a few other fun things. He appeared in a documentary aired on Danish television. He'll be featured in the IMAX film "Brain Power," which premieres worldwide in 2005. He posed for countless photo shoots for magazines and newspapers. My wife thought it was funny when Tugboat would be invited to media interviews and she wouldn't. He even received fan mail and CARE packages from his admirers. But he never let his fame go to his big boxy head. At the end of every day he was still good old Tugs.

There were a few things that never changed about Tugboat. He loved tennis balls. He could sit with a tennis ball at the end of his mouth for hours. He even invented his own game where he'd sit at the top of a staircase and wait for you to throw the ball to him. After he caught it and gave it a good chewing he'd drop his chin to the floor and push the ball out of his mouth with his tongue. It would roll down the steps back to whoever was in charge of tossing it back to him. We called this game "lazy-dog fetch."

Tugboat liked to eat. He never turned down food and often sought it out. He figured out that kids in strollers equaled sticky treats, and pigeons crowded on the ground equaled breadcrumbs. He remembered where the cafés set up their tables during the day, and did his best to help clean up after the patrons at night. The city of Girona could have hired him as a street cleaner.

He liked to sit in the front seat of the car and lean his head on your shoulder while you drove. He would lick the tears off your face if you cried. He would rest his head on your feet while you watched television. He would lie under the kitchen table while you ate dinner. He would bite your wrist gently to tell you he was happy to see you. He loved to roll on his back and punch the air with his paws. He yanked the stuffing and squeakers out of every one of his dog toys. He swallowed his dog food without chewing it. He loved helping with the dishes.

He was a truly special dog, who supported me through thick and thin and was by my side all

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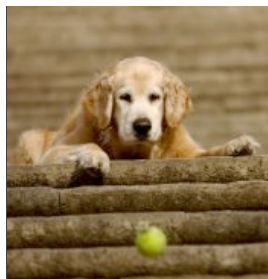
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Tugboat demonstrates the art of 'lazy-dog fetch'

Photo: Tim DeWaele

through the 2003 Tour. He knew I was hurting and he comforted and protected me in a way that was nearly human.

On July 12 he collapsed. He had been sick for about a month after a reaction to an anti-inflammatory arthritis drug that badly irritated his stomach. An edoscopy revealed multiple ulcers. It looked like he had road rash on his insides. The internal bleeding caused by the ulcers made him very weak. We can only assume he had been in the early stages of suffering from cancer when the drug reaction occurred. We think his system was so weakened from the blood loss, the cancer pounced.

After his collapse the vet recommended emergency exploratory surgery. They found carcinoma and tumors throughout his body. One had ruptured on his liver, and had caused the collapse. They recommended putting him down immediately while he was sedated. They gave him no chance of survival.

My wife and I spoke that night, and decided that Tugs had one last road trip in him. I needed to say good-bye and thank you to my trusty companion face to face. Haven brought Tugboat home Monday night and set out for Limoges, France, the next morning. Tugs made the final journey in good form. He was heavily sedated, so he never walked again, but he was alert enough to know he was with the two people who cherished him the most.

Tugs and I slept side by side that night. Ironically, one year after he had done so for me, I was comforting him at the Tour de France. Before the start of stage 10, I said my good-byes. My wife drove him back to Girona where the vet was waiting for her call. On the way into town she stopped at a bakery and bought a whole bag of pastry. It had been weeks since Tugs had been well enough for a treat. But Haven's brother Derek, who traveled with her to France, suggested they take Tugs to a park for his final feast. They carried him out of the car and sat with him under a shady tree and fed him his chocolate and sugar and cheese-covered desserts until there wasn't a crumb left. He was still on earth, but I think, in that moment, he must have been in heaven.

At the end, Haven tucked my jersey from stage 9 under one of Tugs's legs and his last Credit Lyonnais Lion under the other. He was a bike racer's dog from start to finish.

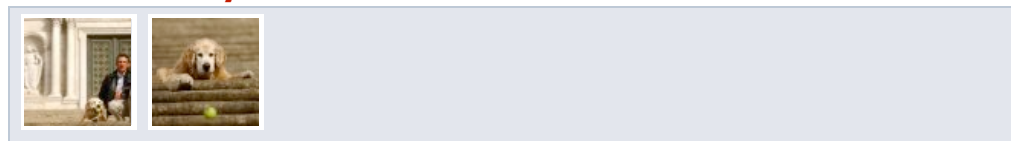
My wife's favorite memory with Tugs is walking down the Champs-Elysees with him last summer at the finish of the Tour, and asking; "Tugboat, do you know how far from Marblehead you are?" Somehow I think he knew.

My favorite memory was ascending a 14,000-foot peak with Tugs when he was a puppy. We got caught in a snowstorm at the top, but that was just part of the fun.

He was such a good friend. Such a good traveler. Such a good companion. Everyone who knew him felt a special bond with him. He loved unconditionally, and will be missed by many. Especially me.

Tugboat, thanks for everything.

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