



Managing Degenerative Myelopathy (DM): Brigitte's Story

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This article is very close to my heart having had to deal with it not that long ago with our "Brigitte". Let me tell you first off this is not an article about managing DM since there is just no managing it, but maybe an article about coping.....what to expect at least from my experience and where to get products and support that will help you help your dog be more mobile for as long as possible. Some people think this is an old dog disease, well I wish that were true. Perhaps some dogs that fall victim to it when they are old, but let me tell you there are plenty of them that are not.

Brigitte was a very active dog who had a mind of her own. She did not conform to the idea of a being normal Bernese, she loved my husband most, and I honestly was a thorn in her side UNTIL she needed me--and she hated to resign herself to the fact that she needed me. Doesn't even sound Bernese does it,.....but that was Brigitte.

She had torn her cruciate earlier in life and we went through a rehab regiment including 3 x a week swimming at a dog center, underwater treadmill, balance balls, etc. So she was no stranger to being handled, and of course living here, she had done conformation, obedience, tracking, tried agility and drafting. The obedience and drafting were difficult with her as, although she loved them,...she did everything on her own terms. Ahh, including trying to climb a tree after a squirrel.....WITH her cart. So life with Brigitte was hilarious, frustrating, and in the end the saddest ending I have ever had to deal with to be honest.

Her first symptoms of DM (before the DNA test was available), was just a slight change in gait, a slight scuffing of her left hind leg when she was tired and then before long, our dog that was like an acrobat who never fell, would turn suddenly as she was used to doing for years, and then have to catch herself from falling. This was starting to happen even in the house. She could still run and play outside at mach speed, but yet I was seeing these changes in the house in the evening. We did x-rays which showed nothing, and chiropractic adjustments, but honestly they did little to help. We also tried supplements that would supposedly slow this



down, but again I don't see that they did anything. This all started at about 7.5 yrs and was the beginning of this journey together. Over the next 1.5 yrs we battled living with this disease as it progressed, sometimes it seemed overnight, until the day she said she couldn't do this anymore. We let her go at just over 9 yrs old. The saddest most difficult part of this was that her mind and spirit were totally healthy and she couldn't understand what was happening to her. The frustration and sadness was all encompassing. This was by far the most difficult euthanasia I have ever had to do, the look on her face.....I will never forget. This disease robbed her of many more years. She didn't have a lump or a bump, her bloodwork was perfect, and yet she couldn't go on.....heartbreaking.

So let's concentrate on the good times and what we DID find, that helped us. As her condition started to deteriorate, the left leg would now be starting to point underneath her to the right once in a while, and when she would get up it was the last to get underneath her and then she was off. She never slowed down, she didn't seem to get it, she was not in any pain and couldn't understand why she was unsteady. She was now falling outside when she was trying to act silly and play bow, and then take off or turn, but she was not a



girl that got depressed easily. She would just pretend she did it on purpose and then take off again with that silly grin on her face. Oh I do miss her, especially writing this. The Winters' here in New Brunswick are hard, but especially hard with this issue going on. She went to work everyday with Russell; she idolized him and loved to go everywhere with him. She would even go and cheer him on when he was running. If they were just training, then she would lay in the car and wait to see him come around the corner and shout her cheers. On race day I would take her and we would sit at specific areas to watch for him. She would whine quietly and watch each runner and nothing. Then when she would catch site of him (LONG before I could recognize him) she would go crazy, in the end howling/screeching for him to pick up the pace. He would talk to her and pat her on the way by, and we would go to the next checkpoint and this would go on. She loved races. So you are getting a sense now of who she was ;O) I was just her driver, since I knew which way the runners were going!

Things took another turn for the worse, one day all of a sudden she was now struggling to get up, first you think it is the floor,why did we put in ceramic and hardwood? We remedied that by putting rugs all over the house for her to get up and follow and not have to step on slippery floor and lose her footing. Well it wasn't the floor, she was losing not only strength, but control, so we had to help her up. At this point the DM test was available and we tested her. She was "At Risk" for developing the disease. Well by then, we knew she had the disease. We have tested everyone in our breeding program now. She was the only one that was AT RISK, thank heavens! Some are CLEAR and some are CARRIERS, but what I do know is that we will never consciously produce this again thanks to the DNA test. I know the test is still being developed or fine tuned and that they are not positive of the mode of inheritance, but they have a really good idea and it just takes more data to prove it. We feel better knowing that we are doing everything we can not to produce this again. After living with it, I think anyone reading this would make the same decision.

So now we are helping Brigitte up every time, she was +100 pound dog and I'm not that much bigger, when Russell was

available it was great, but there were times now he couldn't take her with him to work for the week. Then I found the DM Yahoo group <http://pets.groups.yahoo.com/group/DMBerners>

It is a wonderful community of people who have been through this, who have information, links to great equipment, support, ramps, exercises and some are even willing to pay it forward with equipment which was the case for Brigitte. So it was like my support group on how to deal with this. I learned about the - Help Em Up Harness which was a GODSEND. Here is the link for anyone interested <http://helpemup.com/>

This made our life soooo much better and Brigitte's as well. She wore this until the end. It washes easily, is very sturdy and would recommend it to anyone whose dog has mobility issues for any reason. Brigitte could now do stairs safely and sleep in our room with us again, she could enter and exit vehicles again with grace and best of all, could get up from laying down with an easy grab of a handle. So for a few months this was great, but Brigitte was now starting to go sideways when she walked and falling more. Again thanks to the list and a generous person, we got a set of Eddy's Wheels <http://eddiwheels.com/> to use. We had tried them earlier, but she would have no part of them, her legs hadn't atrophied enough to fit through the supports, and she just wanted them off her. She would rather walk/run/fall which is how she got around for a while. However, as it progressed we tried again. She now could ONLY walk with us holding her harness, including going to the bathroom, which she hated. She was always private with her business and wanted to be in the woods. So, you can just imagine me getting dragged into the woods and then having to turn my back while she went....

Anyway we tried the wheels again and fit them for her. She was OFF, she took off running again and cornering and actually the first day went for a hike because she told us WE ARE going through our trails in the woods. She was back in heaven, sure she dumped the wheels a few times taking off into the thicket, but just looked back and basically said come and fix this, and she was off again. It was good for all of us to

see the joy in her face and the freedom to do her business again privately as well as exercise more and be a dog again. She would even play retrieve games in her wheels. They gave her such freedom and joy.

Our new found freedom gave her about another 6 months, she now went to work with Russell again with her wheels packed and we were all happy for a time. One day I noticed she stopped wanting to come in the house with us. She couldn't use her wheels in the house, so dragged herself around in a sitting position and we left the wheels at the door. She wanted to either stay outside or stay in the garage where we have dog beds/kennels for visiting dogs or to keep anyone separate, if they are hurt or in season. This was the beginning of the end, she got more depressed as she continued to lose control and pulled back socially from all of us. It was heartbreaking to see her not want to be a part of anything. A couple of times she lost control of her bowel and she was mortified! We tried to make nothing of it and clean it, but there were times she was so embarrassed when we were in the car and it happened she turned and cleaned it herself before I could pull over and get it fixed up. She was NOT happy. This did not happen often, maybe 3 times, but for her it was 3 times too many. Things started to deteriorate, I



would get her up with the harness and try to get her into her wheels and she fell....in the front. I thought it was an accident, maybe her legs were asleep, but then it happened again and again. One morning she fell when she was trying to use the bathroom and she just laid there and looked at me as if to say Please make this stop..... I can't do it anymore. I will never forget the look or the day. I helped her

up and promised that this was the last day she would have to deal with this. I made the appt and well no need to go into details, but it was one of the toughest of my time in Bernese. This is not an old dog disease; this is a life robbing disease.

Please consider DNA testing your dog whether he/she is a breeding dog or not and help be part of the solution. Help us find a way to rid our breed of this horrible disease.

When you are buying a new puppy, ask your breeder if the sire and dam are tested? Trust me you don't want to live this nightmare.

I hope that our painful story helps even one person to find help if your dog has this, or convinces one breeder to test their breeding animals, or one buyer to be more knowledgeable when purchasing their new Berner puppy.

In Brigitte's memory.....



Russell and Wendy with their Berner family