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## HEALING HOUND

By Liz Holzemer

Eleven Octobers ago, I hesitantly welcomed a new member to our family. My husband Mark and I had previously visited a breeder in Indian Hills to meet a new litter of Labrador retrievers. We were in discussions - that's all. A few weeks later, I arrived home to a clumsy ball of yellow fur and oversized paws toppling over my feet.

I didn't grow up with a dog. I liked them and had friends who owned dogs, but I didn't have the slightest clue about housebreaking, training and socializing an animal, especially a breed that was known for its limitless energy levels. And, of course, there was the oh-so-minor detail that Mark spent the majority of the year playing baseball around the country. I feared I was the one who would need breaking in.

Thankfully, it was the off-season, so Mark and I would have months to train Koufax together. I had to admit, I was quickly warming up to a creature that was eager to learn, content to curl up on the couch and had a knack for always making me smile no matter my mood or the kind of day I was having.

Not a bad trade off for simply providing the basics - food, water, treats and an endless supply of tennis balls.

But even more, Koufax provided a sense of security during Mark's long road trips. He was my crutch after two brain surgeries - nudging me to take walks to regain my lost strength. When I felt discouraged by my painstakingly slow recoveries, Koufax consoled and comforted.

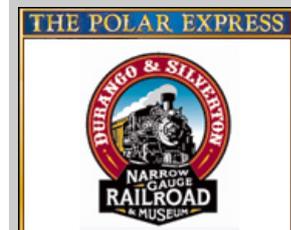
Earlier this year my gut feeling that all was not right with Koufax led to a devastating diabetes diagnosis. He's adapted to a new diet and twice daily insulin injections from a still squeamish mom. But to add insult to injury, Koufax also developed cataracts. He's coping better than this heartbroken mom. Koufax, whose joie de vivre is all about the ball, has kicked his sense of hearing and smell into overdrive to compensate for his blindness.

He doesn't scoff at the unfortunate canine cards dealt him. He's even mastered new commands, "Step up. Step down." A family member I initially resisted is still teaching me the ropes.

Koufax can no longer see, but he's the one guiding me.

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