

Koufax

My Crutch

 By Liz Holzemer

When I was diagnosed with a baseball-sized meningioma brain tumor eight years ago, I never dreamed I'd survive brain surgery. And I couldn't imagine recovering on my own when just weeks later my husband, Mark—a professional baseball player at the time—had to leave for spring training in Clearwater, Florida.

Thankfully, I had an incredible network of family, friends and neighbors providing support, preparing and delivering meals, and shuttling me back and forth for follow-up doctors' appointments.

However, I just knew deep down inside that I would need something more. As well as having to cope with the emotional scars from such traumatic surgery, how would I endure the long-distance separation from Mark? How would I combat the lonely nights until I was cleared to resume life with him again?

Six letters was the answer...

K-O-U-F-A-X

Our yellow Labrador puppy who became my personal coach, cheerleader, counselor, and confidant.

During the early weeks of my recovery when I had neither the energy nor desire to leave the confines of my couch, Koufax would instinctively position himself along the right side of my face—the same side I'd had my surgery—and nap the days away with me.

I knew it would be impossible to walk Koufax on a lead—I couldn't risk the pulling or straining. God forgive I popped a staple or two! Somehow, some way, he just knew that patience would pay off for the patient. With my slow and unsteady gait, Koufax, ever the gentleman, matched his pace to mine and—sensing when I needed a breather—stalled by sniffing out another dog's scent in a patch of grass until I had recharged. Initially fearful, I began to look forward to our daily loop and as the weeks progressed, I became strong enough to increase them. Eventually, I had enough energy to teach Koufax how to fetch, with a baseball of course. He even learned to shake left-pawed after his namesake.

But I had my dog days, too. While Mark toiled away in spring training hoping to earn a roster spot, I slipped into an emotional slump. Before the tears even began to spill, Koufax was there with his wet nose pressed



against my face—right side of course—to comfort and console me. A patient whisperer perhaps?

Yes, and protector. After my daughter, Hannah, and son, Hunter, were born, Koufax kept a watchful eye on them throughout the night with his under-the-crib stakeouts. If I failed to hear their cries, Koufax alerted me as if to say, "Hey mom, my younger siblings are hungry!"

Koufax and I have come a long way. I've recovered, and even though the scars have healed, I do suffer daily with a few health deficits. But on those days I feel like throwing myself a pity party, Koufax reminds me, with a nudge of his nose or an obvious drop of a tennis ball at my feet, to cast those thoughts aside, because there's a life to be lived and relished. 

