

Published Thursday June 10, 2010

Heidi Woodard: Sit. Stay. Now go on.

Debbie Downer spoiler alert: I had to put my dog down last week. If you choose to read on, then that is entirely on you.

My husband, Ryan, and I got married in the summer of 1999. We bought our first dog later that same year and HE decided to name her Murphy – even though she was a female dog – after the great Braves outfielder, Dale Murphy. Men and their sports icons...I know.



Eightball, dressed as the Greek god Zeus for Halloween.

We were new homeowners at the time and our pug puppy quickly became the center of our universe. Murphy got more attention than most kids do. I am still blaming my husband for forever ruining that perfect serenity 10 years ago.

Bound to even out the male-to-female ratio in our household, Ryan ventured out one night and came home with a very tiny black pug puppy with a white patch on his chest, who we affectionately named Eightball. Murphy “needed a companion” according to Ryan. I needed another dog like I needed a hole in the head.

Eightball was the runt of the litter and was all kinds of jacked up from day one. He seemed to struggle to make it through those initial nights at our house without coughing up his lungs. I recall wondering if it was normal to hear more hacking than whimpering from a brand new puppy. We forced Murphy to sleep with him in a shared kennel thinking the companionship would comfort them both.

While Murphy was a pretty normal pug – defiant but loyal, smart but sneaky, funny yet incredibly frustrating – Eightball was just plain dumb and broke all the rules.

He pooped in his kennel (something I was confident no dogs ever did before I met him). He managed to scratch one of his eyes to the severity of requiring a \$600 vet bill. He lifted his leg and marked his territory on everything, including one of our children, whenever he felt like it. He ate his own... well...let's just say, we only had to pick up after Murphy's mess in our backyard. He got ran over by a pick-up truck and, by some miracle of God, was able to walk away with only a few cuts. He would "air swim" with his front paws if I carried him through the rain or to a running hose for a bath. He even decided to run full steam into a river chasing after a boat, without having the slightest clue how to swim, which led to the purchase of life jackets for both dogs and constant ridicule by family and friends during subsequent summers.

No amount of scolding or punishment would ever change him. No amount of obedience training would ever make him behave differently.

He hated being dressed up so it was sweet torture for me to transform him into Zeus or a pumpkin for Halloween. He would look up at me while sporting one of his costumes and his expression would say, "Really?! You've got to be kidding me with this ridiculous get-up." And I would telepathically talk right back to him, "For all the headaches you have caused, it's the least I could do."

Over the years, his eyes became duller and the bounce in his step slower. I tried to ignore what I knew was happening. He was getting older. As all dogs do.

Murphy's freedom became more and more limited because of our choices. Like we had done when they were puppies together, we started kenneling both dogs together throughout the day. Even though she could be trusted to run the house, we were worried about Eightball being left alone and confused.

Despite attempts to save his vision, Eightball eventually became blind and disoriented and his quality of life quickly declined. I kept praying he would pass naturally in his sleep. When that didn't happen (he never did what I wished!) I made the difficult call to the family vet and told our kids that Eightball would be leaving us for Heaven, where he could see, run and be happier than he was here on Earth.

Ryan once told me when I was in the shower with our canine children (yes, you read that right) that I would make a good mom someday. I think Eightball taught me how to be patient. He taught me how to find humor in less than ideal situations. He taught me how to love unconditionally. He taught me that I have the strength to make the ultimate sacrifice of letting a dumb dog go while holding him in my arms and sobbing uncontrollably. And that has been one of the most difficult decisions I have made in my life.

I would like to think he is lifting his leg on the pearly gates right now. We all miss you, Eightball.
(January 20, 2000 – June 3, 2010)