

JOEY FINDS A HOME

Since 1970 my wife Claire and I have owned three Brittanys one after the other, each one with unique physical and personal qualities. Maxwell's Lostriver Trailblazer, our current resident senior, is 15 years old and suffers from the expected age-related infirmities: loose and unpredictable bowels and bladder, chronic rhinitis, neuropathy in his hindquarters and failing eyesight and hearing. Despite his age and condition, the Brittany spirit burns bright in his soul: meal times and "walkies" in the hills still make his day.

For the past two years, Claire has surfed the American Brittany Rescue web site, bleary-eyed from weeping through the poignant tales of abandoned, sick and injured dogs, especially the seniors, all the while acutely conscious of her ambivalence about finding a young companion for Blazer: would he sink into depression, or draw energy and enthusiasm from the youngster in his last years? Would he feel neglected while we brought the young one up to speed with obedience training and "house rules"? Late August, in a leap of faith, she told me about an interesting candidate she saw on the ABR web site. Although "Lucky" looked a little "goofy," she was intrigued by his proximity—a foster home only a mile away. What would it hurt, I told her on Friday, just to take a peek at him: no prior commitments, just an inspection visit. Somewhat reluctantly I noted, she called the foster—an attorney named Dave—who agreed to bring him over on Saturday while Claire attended her morning class. I would let her know if, by our standards, "Lucky" passed muster. Then we both could check him out on Sunday.

When I opened the door to Dave's knock on Saturday, I knew we had a new dog. "Lucky" had the build of a marathoner—long powerful legs, big feet, a deep chest, and well-muscled hindquarters. At three and a half years old, he appeared on the gaunt side of healthy. His flat coat was a glowing patchwork of bright ivory and rich mahogany. Most remarkable about him were his eyes—like variegated amber set in a large square head—they tracked me steadily as Dave inspected our house and yard and we discussed his qualities and background. "He was on death row at the Martinez Animal Shelter when ABR called," Dave told me. "I just lost 'Partner' my 15 year-old Brittany this spring, so it was hard to turn them down. But I'm not ready for another dog yet."

After Dave left, the phone rang. Claire had to know the verdict, even though her class still was in session. "He's a keeper," I told her. "But you're the final judge." At dinner that night I supplied more detail. Dave had told me "Lucky" was one of two Brittanys left at the Martinez Animal Shelter on the same day, the other being his brother "Tango." "Lucky" had spent his entire life in a 7-foot by 11 foot outside enclosure until his owner realized he would never have the time to train him for bird hunting. "Lucky's" hyper-submissive, cringing demeanor suggested a questionable upbringing at best. Still riddled with ambivalence, Claire met "Lucky" the next day at Dave's house. What hooked her was the sight of him peering intently out of the den window wagging his stump of a tail furiously as if to say, "Oh boy. These must be my new humans." Dave told us had he kept him, he would have changed his name to Joey—a moniker that better fit his personality and Dave's fondness for the movie *Pal Joey*. We adopted Joey on the spot.



Back home, introduction to the senior went well, to judge by the tail wagging and polite sniffing. Still, I sensed Claire was having problems. Later she confessed to guilt feelings. Did she rush into this too soon? Would Blazer go into a funk? Was she being disloyal to the old guy after all these years of loyalty, comradeship, and love? Was the adoption reversible? Her angst spiked that evening when Joey made a playful pass at Blazer, bowling him over on the living room rug. The old guy's howls of indignation and his upside down thrashing shook Claire's confidence in her judgment. "What have I done to my senior?" she asked herself. "Is this fair to him at his age?" Doubts, recriminations, and outright uncertainty kept her awake most of that night. I did what I could to assure her that Joey soon would settle down and become a positive factor in Blazer's life.

As one week rolled into another, the mantle of neglect and abuse that Joey arrived with began to drop off. Anxious whining at the garden gate during our absences diminished. Cowering and slinking away at my approach gave way to tail-wagging and enthusiastic welcoming rituals. We soon realized Joey was a blank slate—a puppy residing in the body of a three-year-old bird dog. It was obvious he never had been welcomed inside a house, walked on a lead, or offered food in his own bowl. He inhaled his meals like a ravenous hyena: 40 seconds flat by my stopwatch, much to Dave's amusement as he stopped by for dinner. I told Dave I had never seen a dog "eat" his water. Soon his prominent ribcage was subsumed as he gained weight without altering his lanky, graceful physique.

Around the house he became a shadow, trailing Claire or me to the office, den, guest room, living room, kitchen or laundry room. He even enjoyed watching me putter in the garage. He seemed fascinated by what we were doing and, most of all, making sure we didn't slip away never to return. He seemed starved for human contact and affection, and most of all assurance that this arrangement was permanent. When either one of us approached him, he dropped his head, collapsed upside down on the floor and offered his chest for a rub. Often he would creep into my office where I was trying to pay bills or write. He would lay his big head in my lap, then ever so tentatively raise his forequarters until we were eyeball-to-eyeball—not conducive to business work or creativity, but essential, in his mind, to solidify Brittany-human bonding.



When we are away from the house, Joey and Blazer share a comfortable "condo" in the basement, complete with insulated kennels, fresh water, play toys and carpeted surfaces. Classical music plays from a radio in the corner. A hatch leads to a large multi-level yard, perfect for "lapping" at top speed around an oval course, stalking winter birds in the multiflora rose hedge, or watching buzzards cruise lazily over the meadows and clouds form over the shoulder of Mt. Tamalpais. After work rain or shine, we head for the hills on a 30 to 40 minute romp. Joey ends his day tucked into a comfortable, deep-cushioned box in the kitchen, probably thinking to himself, "This has to be my forever home."

To learn more about how three other Brittanys fared with Bill and Claire over thirty years, visit www.baylaurelpress.com and click on the "Dogs" button.