

Radio's story

We wrote this text as a measure of our love not only to Radio but also to the Vizsla breed at large, and hope that openness and sharing of information will be seen as a good thing, not as something to worry about.

I never forget when we first went to see Radio and his littermates. Once the breeders matched Radio with us, we could not wait until he was old enough to be taken home. His breeders had a web-cam on the little red ones and needless to say we were so excited that we were glued to our computer-screens.

From the very beginning Radio was a truly lovely and beautiful dog (getting comments from it seemed everybody we met), fond of both people and other animals. The one thing we noticed from early on was that he seemed to have problems putting on weight. We did try, in consultation with our vet, several types of feeding regimes, but to no avail. The conclusion arrived at was that he was a dog with a 'sensitive' stomach. However, none of this affected his energy levels - 'full of beans' has always been a description seemingly made for Radio.

When Radio was about 11 months old, around November 2005, we noticed him drooling excessively. It was only much later that we learned this could have been an early indicator of the onset of muscle atrophy, preventing him from containing the saliva in his mouth. Soon after, Radio seemed to drink and drink but the water level in his bowl remained the same. We took him to the vet, and another one, but nothing. By now he also began to have troubles swallowing his food, and this time the vet found a large abscess on the back of Radio's throat. There seemed to be no reason for this wound in his throat, Radio looked fine, was sparkly, his fur shiny, and no diagnosis was arrived at. The most frustrating aspect during this period was that no one could give us any straight answers, clues, or help - why would a young, very healthy looking dog have such a problem? At this stage, the symptoms were so subtle that it was difficult to draw any definite conclusions, and since the abscess healed promptly upon administration of antibiotics, the episode was laid to rest.

This, however, turned out to be just the beginning of many more courses of antibiotics this unfortunate autumn and winter. Radio's stomach did not seem to take lightly to the medication. It later turned out that he in fact had a bout of giardia and a suspected amoeba infestation - ailments, we have been told by specialists at Queen Mother Hospital for Animals Hertfordshire [QMHA] that are indicators of a compromised immune system

In spite of his health problems, he seemed to remain on top form. We had started ringcraft classes when Radio was about 10 months old, and there he did show some potential, which is why we started to show him a little in companionship shows (we were terrible handlers) - Radio was never last, but never in the top three either. It was, however, the perceptive eye of our ringcraft trainer to first spot a slight change in Radio's gait. This was in late January 2006. He said he could not put his finger on it, but there was something strange. To give an indication of the subtlety of the problem the other trainer could not see it at all, nor could our vet whom we went to see straight away. By now we had been frequent visitors at several veterinarians to the point where we began to doubt our own judgment.

Come February and everything started to happen rapidly. Radio's energy levels went suddenly downhill and he began to sleep much more. He also visibly stopped being springy in his gait (but still was full of beans at the beginning of walks). Most bizarre was that his head seemed to grow in a weird way, with the skull becoming increasingly pronounced, ever so slight at first. In a few weeks he was reduced to a pitiful state. Again he began to have problems swallowing his food as well as having difficulties drinking. Still no one could give us any conclusive answers to what was going on with our little friend. We now entered a period of utter helplessness and uncertainty.

The vet took a variety of tests, some to try to discern or at least be able to eliminate various infections. The first definite result was devastating: his *creatine kinase* levels were astronomical which means that his muscles were being destroyed at a very high rate. Our vet told us that he suspected masticatory myositis, a muscle degenerative illness affecting the masticatory [jaw muscles] as well as the throat muscles. This would explain both the swallowing problems and sudden changes of his skull. What we thought was his head growing was in fact his muscles shrinking away. Curiously whilst telling us this, the vet produced his medical dictionary where the entry masticatory myositis was illustrated with the photograph of a Vizsla suffering from the condition. The vet then performed a muscle biopsy to determine whether this muscle condition was caused by his own immune system or due to an infection hitherto undetected. The vets tested and re-tested to make sure that the condition was not caused by an infection (insect bites, parasites, etc.).

Meanwhile as a precaution, he was treated with antibiotics to make absolutely sure no underlying infection would make his condition even worse.

We were desperate for any advice on what may cause this and one of the things we did was check whether any of his littermates or other close relatives had had similar problems. We were in constant contact with Radio's breeders anyway, and they were very supportive, however, this was their first litter, and none of the other puppies had any troubles. So I called his mum and dad's breeders, but no luck, they told me that they did not recognise any such symptoms. Sadly this changed shortly after with one of Radio's younger relatives presenting the same symptoms.

In addition to his choking, Radio now became unable to urinate properly for his bladder muscles became also affected (this almost saw him fitted with a catheter which we tried to avoid because he would have had to stay in hospital). Radio's condition deteriorated so fast that the vets could not wait with steroid treatment until the biopsy results come back and he was put (in addition to antibiotics) on a high dose [60mg] of prednisolone.

10 days after the biopsy was taken the results came back. Radio was diagnosed to have an even more severe condition affecting not only the head but the whole of the body, polymyositis, a muscle degenerative disease, which is a devastating condition with a guarded prognosis.

We now entered a period of grinding worry whether our young and madly loved dog would be able to pull through. Due to his swallowing

problems, caused by the muscle degeneration, we had to hand-feed him for nearly two months, after which he started to be able to eat by himself again – but even now, almost 8 months later, he still has troubles swallowing both food and water. The initial recovery was ever so slow, and frightening, for Radio did not take lightly to the steroids, ran into walls, fell over, and seemed drunk most of the time. It took about a month until Radio began to be better, and then suddenly very fast, in line with reducing the steroids. By late May, early June he seemed to be back to normal, this was to be the last month of steroid treatment, and he thrived again.

This all happened only a few months before Radio's half-brother was diagnosed with the very same illness.

On the 28th of May Radio developed severe diarrhea, but we had been prepared for this because our vet had told us that the steroid treatment would make him prone to pick up gastric bacteria, which is why we gave him pro-biotics daily. Within hours his condition had become serious. At 4 am on the 29th Radio woke us up whimpering, clearly in a lot of pain. Immediately we realised something was seriously wrong - he seemed to be paralysed. His legs could not carry him at all. Radio's immune system was weaker than expected and he had developed [overnight literally] acute polyarthritis. Back he was on a high dose of steroids thought to be tapered over a three-month period. However, one morning a few weeks later Radio did not perform his duty as an alarm clock - he had a relapse upon reduction of steroids, needless to say, quite a big setback for him and us.

Once again Radio was put on very high doses of steroids and ever since we have been tapering the dose this time very very slowly. He is doing well although his swallowing problem is still there and still quite severe. He can eat alone but it is a little painful to watch.

To add to Radio's troubles he has been diagnosed with Irritable Bowel Disease which possibly arose as a result of his weak immune system. He has been on a restricted diet that so far has worked wonders – for the first time in his life his stomach problems have been brought under control and we hope it will stay that way.

Radio is still on immune suppressant medication [15mg Prednisolone and 50mg Imuran], and we don't yet know if in the long run he will be able to maintain health without it. His brothers and sisters will not be bred from as a precaution to avoid this being an illness that could potentially be passed on [which would be heartbreaking] and we have taken blood samples for future gene studies. We did this because in certain other breeds masticatory muscle atrophy in particular is sadly no longer uncommon, and if there is anyway that this can be avoided in the most wonderful Vizsla breed, then **all expenses are worth it**.

Sadly, Radio lost his battle and died in February 2008. He was just a little over 3 years of age. Thanks to him and other early contributors to the research the prognosis for affected vizslas is now very much more optimistic - with prompt diagnosis and treatment the illness can usually be well controlled.