

My First Experience With Wobblers in a Great Dane

Gemini was a true show dog, he loved being in the ring. Maybe it was the attention he got and that everyone was looking at him. I don't know, I just know that he loved to show. He was a very nice puppy and showed great promise. Unfortunately, shortly after making his debut in the ring with a WD/BOS win from the 6-9 puppy class, he was diagnosed with Wobblers Syndrome.

This began one day when I watched him step over a dog bed and he dragged one back foot across the bed. My adrenalin jumped and I thought to myself, "oh no, he's a wobbler". But then I calmed myself down and told myself that this was ridiculous and I was being way too paranoid with my first show puppy.

A week or so went by and I was bathing him for a show. He was wearing a light weight show choke attached to a leash that was tied to a post on my deck where I bathed him. I had forgotten something and went back in the house. I saw him from the window, struggling at the lead trying to get free. He had spooked at something and had pulled the choke so tight across the middle of his neck that I had a hard time getting enough slack in it to unclip it from the leash. Once I was back, he seemed ok and I finished his bath. That night we went to handling class and when I got him out of the truck, he fell down. I thought something was wrong and walked him slowly up and down in the parking lot. I didn't see any problem. I moved him a little faster and had one of the trainers come out and take a look. They didn't see any problem either. So, thinking it was just an odd event, we went into the building and took a right turn just inside the door and he fell down again. I knew something was really wrong.

I skipped the class, took him home and we were at the vet the next day. The vet examined him and didn't find anything that looked serious enough to pursue a more thorough exam. He prescribed Butezolodin and recommended that I keep him less active for a week or so.

Gemini seemed to be doing better. I was bathing him to get him ready for another show and the same incident happened. Again the choke was tight around the middle of his neck. After that incident it was obvious that something was wrong with him. I decided to take him to the show, not to show him, but to get opinions from people there. Well, it was obvious to most of them that something was wrong with this dog and one person who had had a lot of experience with wobblers suggested that was what was going on. I stopped at the vet on my way home and made an appt for the following Monday.

This was the same vet that had seen him previously and he noticed that Gemini was obviously having some neurological problem and did a milegram. The milegram showed that he definitely had a malformation in his cervical vertebrae between c3 and c4. The vet implied that this was probably the time to make a decision to euthanize him as he didn't feel that his condition would improve and told me he didn't think he'd be able to walk at all in a year or so. I thanked him for his advice, asked him for copies of everything he had on wobblers in his library, paid my bill and left in tears.

The milegram is a useful tool in diagnosing spinal problems, but it is also very dangerous. Gemini was much worse after his milegram. I had to lift him into the truck and hold him up by a harness so he could pee and poop. Gemini was just 10 months old.

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I spent the next several weeks contacting everyone I could to talk about wobblers and learn as much as I could. I spoke with homeopathic and naturopathic vets as well as surgeons who were experienced at the surgery done to fix this problem. I talked with horse people and Doberman people and many experienced Great Dane Breeders. I took him to Neurologists, Orthopedic Specialists, Chiropractors, Naturopathic Vets to pick their brains on his condition and wobblers in general. I also studied veterinary texts on the subject and developed an idea for a home-based protocol for treatment. I based this protocol on what I found in horse and homeopathic treatments for this condition. I also was experimenting on the theory that while I learned in my research that nerve tissue will not regenerate once damaged, I hoped that if I could prevent further damage from occurring at the site of the malformation, the nerve signals would find a different pathway to the extremities affected by the damage. If those signals could find a new path to the destination - his sensation in those limbs and mobility could be restored.

This meant a lot of rest and stabilization of the neck. The description of what steps I took follows.

- Gemini had always been getting vitamin C in his daily meals. I gradually increased the dosage from 1000mg per day, to 6000mg per day.
- Gemini was a growing adolescent male Dane and as such, was already on the lanky side, but I reduced his weight to give him less to "carry" during the healing process
- I reduced the protein in his food to 18% by mixing a low protein adult food with a lower protein senior diet.
- During this recovery period, Gemini NEVER wore a choke or buckle collar.
- When I had him on a lead, he wore a harness.

Gemini was not allowed to roam the yard by himself. I took him out to the fenced yard wearing his harness on a 6 ft lead. When I was not at home, he was in a 10x12 kennel. When I was at home, he was in the house unless it was time for our walks in the yard. He was not allowed to play with other dogs.

He was kept very quiet. This may seem too difficult or even cruel considering this was a puppy under one year of age, but I wanted to have this dog for as long as possible and it seemed that if I was going to save his life, this confinement was necessary and by far more acceptable than euthanization.

I also contacted a orthopedic laboratory where prosthetic devices are made for people and asked them if they would work with me on making a cervical collar for this dog. After a consultation with the vet that had seen Gemini at UC Davis, the technician took a cast of Gemini's neck and designed a heavy plastic cervical collar with velcro closures in the back. The collar was flared at the bottom and at the top. The top was also rimmed with a soft leather to provide some cushioning. The plastic had holes in it to allow air to flow to the skin. He wore this collar constantly during his recovery. I took it off him every few days for cleaning, but once that was done, I put it back on him.

Here is a picture of Gemini behind the Orthopedic Lab wearing his new cervical collar. Being from an old polaroid, it's not the best quality.

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Once I got all this done, I watched him for several months. His condition appeared to be improving dramatically. I think it was about 8 months and I decided to test the results I was seeing. Every change had to be done one at a time, while watching and waiting to see if there was any deterioration.

First I got his weight up to normal for his size. I put him on a regular adult diet and I watched him very closely during this period and did not see any signs of neurological trouble. I watched him for another month after he reached his goal weight and still, no signs of trouble.

Next, I dropped the vitamin C in his diet back down to 1000mg per day. I watched and waited another month. No signs of trouble.

I started to let him go out to the yard by himself. I still didn't let him play with other dogs, but he no longer was being walked around on a lead. He still stayed in his kennel while I was away. After a month or so and no signs of trouble I took the next step.

I started to take the collar off him at night when he slept. He wore it all day, but when he'd lay down in bed, I'd take it off and wash it. First thing in the morning, I put it back on him. I watched and waited another month. No signs of deterioration.

I gradually started reducing the amount of time he wore the collar during the daytime. After some period of time, he only wore it when he was in the car going for a vet visit.

It was at this point, I decided it was time to test my vision. Was I really seeing what I wanted to see or was this recovery real? I decided to enter him in a couple of local shows and see how he did.

Well, he had a great time, didn't show real well, but it was obvious that he wasn't in any real serious trouble movement wise. There are certainly a lot of dogs without his condition that don't move as good as he did!

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The third show he was in after his recovery, he won 2pts under Betty Moore at the Del Monte Kennel Club show in Pebble Beach. This win picture is at the top of the Memorial page. He continued to take single points here and there and then took a 4pt major the day after our Specialty show. I eventually retired him with 11 points because he just hated to ride in the car and it was not going to be easy to find a major at a local show. It wasn't worth putting him through the stress just to achieve my personal goal.

A lot of people wondered why I showed this dog at all since he was obviously never going to be bred. After all, showing dogs is supposed to be a sport where the quality of a breeding program is tested against the competition. In theory, the best dogs will win and prove their worthiness of reproducing. Well, in my opinion, just because a dog is a champion doesn't mean it should be bred, so what difference does it really make if I want to show a dog I never intend to breed? I enjoyed it, the dog loved the show ring - once he got out of the car, that is, and it gave me experience in showing dogs. So, there we were and considering the amount of time he spent away from the show ring, his win record was pretty good.

Gemini eventually was allowed back out to play with the other dogs and did not begin to show any signs of deterioration in his mobility until he was about 7. He started to knuckle over in the rear more often and was less stable on his rear. I had to separate him from my bitch because she was playing with him so hard she would knock him down. He'd be struggling to get up and she'd be jumping all over him. So he spent his last year enjoying the company of the cats instead.

Wobblers is generally more common in Dobermans than it is in Danes. It tends to be diagnosed in Danes as puppies and in Dobermans as adults, however. Typically the malformation is located either at the top of the cervical spine between c1 and c2 or at the bottom between c6 and c7. Gemini's was smack in the middle of his neck at c3-c4. As I mentioned above, horses get wobblers syndrome and interestingly enough, so do livestock raised on hot diets in small pens where they are being grown quickly to meet market demand for meat. There is some evidence to show that wobblers can be a diet related condition. There are instances where it can be attributed to injury also.

While Gemini was both on a higher protein diet as a puppy and had the two episodes of the impaction on his neck, which happened to be right at the site of his malformation, I do think that this dog may have had a hereditary predisposition for this condition. This is entirely my opinion and based on what I learned from his lineage. I found that while he is at least one puppy his father sired that has this condition, his grandfather was also the sire of a few dogs I know of that had this condition and I have "heard" from several sources that his great grandfather was also the sire of several puppies with this condition.

The bottom line is nobody knows for sure what causes this problem in dogs and it is likely to be caused by different things in different individuals. And maybe even a variety of circumstances in a given individual. I just can't say if this dog would have still had this condition if he had been raised on a lower protein diet as a puppy and never had those incidents on the deck fighting the choke collar. What would have happened? Nobody knows. If it isn't related to a genetic predisposition, can this dog be bred? I chose to assume that here was a genetic factor involved and neutered him when he retired.

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As a result of my experience and being able to share with others, there have been a number of people that I have communicated with on this problem. I've been able to talk with people in several countries and have been happy to know that these experiences I've shared have been helpful to them in managing their dogs with this condition and having them live out longer lives than was originally hoped. The internet provides us with exciting possibilities for information exchange and sharing. This is a great way to open up and provide exposure and knowledge that would otherwise be very limited (word of mouth at ringside) or unavailable to people completely. It's my intention to use it as widely and as wisely as possible.

For more information about wobblers, check out the information on Jill Swedlows website and others listed on my [Links](#) page.