

A pet owner's perspective of the 'reality' of living with a disabled dachshund.
My lasting legacy to a great friend and companion 'Digby'
by Emily Critchley

As long as I can remember, I had always wanted a black and tan dachshund and when I heard that a local breeder had puppies on the way, I didn't hesitate.

Out of six, Digby was the only black and tan dog in the litter and so the decision was made and God gave me the little dog I had so wanted. In April 2007 after carefully preparing his new abode, we went to collect him. My dream had come true and I was going to be the best Mum I could be.

Digby was the first dog I had ever owned and so it was all new to me, but I like a first child, you find your own way of doing things, and so it was.

Like many dachshunds, Digby was bold, bright and at times stubborn. He had such a big character for such a small dog and I felt a real bond and spiritual connection with him immediately, which grew deeper as time passed. I recall one night him going out into the garden and scaring off some youths who had congregated late at night at the back of our house. They scampered on hearing 'the bark', which my husband always joked was, 'way outside his weight range'. If only they knew what lay behind the fence!

I recall many happy and special times with Digby and I was always thankful for every day we had him in our lives. Digby loved long walks, which he never seemed to tire of and if he had his red ball, that was a bonus, as he carried it in his mouth for the duration and would seemingly drop it on his terms, with an expectation that we threw it!

I knew that some dachshunds suffered back problems, but was relatively ignorant to the whys and hows. We felt that by keeping Digby on a healthy diet, well exercised and slim that we would escape any issues.

Then on the 2nd July 2011, aged 4 ½ years, after a crazy dachshund moment around the living room, he screeched out in pain and subsequently showed now what I know to be clear and common signs of a disc herniation (IVDD). I called the vet immediately and was told to monitor him, which I did, but took him down to the on call vet in the middle of the night as he was whining and would not settle. After an anti inflammatory injection, and on the advice of the vet, we took him back home and crate rested him for the duration of the day, but as time passed, he could not stand on his back legs and was struggling to go to the toilet. This was very upsetting to see and quite honestly I struggle to recall events of that weekend.

We took him back to the vet later that afternoon in order that they could monitor his pain relief overnight. I got home and started to research on line for disc herniation and this is when the reality of the situation started to set in. I hadn't liked what I had seen and when I started to read how time was a huge factor in the long term prognosis, I became even more concerned, given that 24 hours had already passed and it would be over 36 hours by the time we got him to a veterinary specialist.

The following morning we rushed Digby to the Animal Health Trust, Newmarket, where they carried out an initial examination, followed by an emergency MRI, which confirmed that Digby had suffered a severe compression and would need surgical intervention if there was to be any chance of recovery. We went ahead with surgery to decompress the spine and waited with anticipation.

Digby's spine had responded well to the decompression and now we waited in hope for deep pain to return and signs of any motor function to the rear quarters. This was a slow process and we knew that we had to be patient, as there was no guarantee it would return. We just took one day at a time, as there was little else we could do, but at the same time knowing that Digby was in the best place for the time being.

During that month, I spent my time researching the rehabilitation of dachshunds with IVDD, which was a distant world to the one I had known previously. Digby was going to rely on me more than ever now and I needed to be prepared and organised for the future, as much as I could be, given that both my husband and I worked full time in demanding jobs.

I read many inspirational stories about dachshunds surviving IVDD and knowing Digby's determined character and spirit, I felt that we too could undertake the task and make good attempts to help him walk again, with time, patience and effort. I didn't see that there were any other options than to 'go for it!' Whatever the future held, I wanted to give Digby the best life I could for the remainder of his time here.

Out of all the websites dedicated to this disease, 'Dodgerlist' stood out to me as being the dachshund owner's self help guide for the rehabilitation of not only dachshund's, but other small dogs with IVDD. It covered everything that I needed to know all on one site.

I also soon came to realise that for Digby to have a life, he was going to need a cart to get around, which would also assist him in gaining some motor function in his rear legs. I spent hours researching the best cart for a dachshund and through a hit on You Tube, I came across, 'Frankie, 'The Walk n Roll Dog', who is permanently paralysed in her rear legs, but her owner Barbara Techel had given her a new life on wheels with a company in the US called 'Eddie's Wheels'.

What I like most about the 'Eddie's Wheels' cart is they are made to measure, light weight, easy to use and keep the dachshund's back perfectly straight. And so I ordered one, which arrived soon after his homecoming, which with the assistance of homemade ramps, he took to it like a duck to water.

Digby arrived home on the 2nd August and given that he was now bladder incontinent, it was almost like going back to his puppy days, with a bowl, rubber gloves and a sponge to hand, not forgetting the puppy pads, of which there were a few!! In next to no time and by watching and re watching the bladder expression video on 'Dodgerlist', we all managed to master the art, 'phew', That was one hurdle over with!

Given that my husband worked away from the home in the day and I was nearby, my Mum helped me out with his day to day care and physio regime, to encourage muscle tone and in time motor function.

Although Digby was on the whole, a placid dog, he had in the past bitten when being touched on his rear quarters and despite two visits from behaviorists, we could never understand why. This fear based aggression appeared to get worse after his operation, as I recall him biting one nurse in front of me, which was very upsetting and another when he returned to the trust for a weekend. So carrying out physio and other tasks proved difficult and so on those occasions, to protect both the handler and Digby, we resulted in muzzling him.

He started post operative acupuncture and weekly hydrotherapy, by this time at a cost to my pocket, as the quota for alternative therapy from my pet insurance had already been redeemed.

He was a little star in the hydro pool and was quite popular with the hydro therapists for his character and sheer determination as he rode the waves on the doggy treadmill. This was very encouraging to see as there were improvements every time he went, and so we continued.

We kept him on Royal Canin, (food for dachshunds) with an added multi vitamin and Q10 supplement, recommended for spinal injuries in dogs. I took him for a short walk most days so that he could be 'a dog' and gain some mental stimulation from the outside world and would bath him with his sea creatures as a bit of fun, which he loved.

It wasn't long before I got us both into a routine. In time Digby managed to hold his bladder for most of the night, but I still roused most nights when I heard him moving about on his puppy pad, which was a sign that he had either voided or defecated. And so I would religiously get up and go see to him, as like most animals, they are uncomfortable in sleeping with their excrement and Digby was no exception.

I too would come home every lunch time and see to him and take him out in his cart in the garden and have a game of ball in the short time that I had.

Monday, Wednesdays and Saturdays became hydro therapy evenings. This was an hour and a half round trip, which often meant me getting in gone 9pm and hitting the sack on arrival, knowing that I would probably be getting up again within a few hours to sort my little man out.

By this time, December was on the horizon and I could feel the events of the last 5 months taking the strain, in all manner of ways. I felt like I was on a merry-go-round, unable to get off anytime soon. I recall sitting and wondering what life was all about, as my life had condensed down somewhat. I remember answering that, "it was for Digby", as I loved him unconditionally. I wasn't doing it for me as it was now at the detriment of my own well being.

I think this was the moment when I had a serious reality check and sudden dawning as to what the future perhaps held. As before then, I had been very much living in the here and now, taking one day at a time. I can't say that it particularly filled me with joy, but more a foreboding of what was to come, which from that moment, did not leave me.

I had many a discussion with my husband about the future with Digby and unfortunately for me, Digby's fear based aggression, had got worse, to the point where he would not allow anyone else but me to manoeuvre him in and out of the cart. This left me in a difficult and restrictive place, as he could not go into normal kennels and neither was it fair on him or another that he to be left with a stranger.

Which ever way we turned, I was struggling to see how we were going to have a reasonable life. I could cope with Digby being disabled and slightly incontent, but with the fear based aggression thrown into the mix, the odds were stacked high against us all.

I found this deeply upsetting and a pretty hopeless state, especially after all I had given and the fact that he was actually now starting to walk, all be it in a fashion on his own.

In the back of my mind I knew euthanasia was a viable option and I had a knowingness that every time we had a conversation about the future, that my tears were the beginning of me letting go.

I knew my options were now limited and so I really now did need to give it one last shot to see if there was anyone out there in the dachshund world who could assist us. Through Ian Seath from

the Dachshund Breed Council (DBC), I contacted the Southern Dachshund Association to ask if DaxAid could assist. Through them, I contacted a local dog sitter who was an ex veterinary nurse, in the event she would be able to assist in the event we wanted to go away, but I could hear her reluctance to get involved.

My Mum, who has been a huge support throughout this whole process and who perhaps a little like me, didn't want to give up hope, was very kind in putting herself out to assist. Mum felt that if we could get Digby to a point where he was desensitised from his fear based aggression, then it may be possible for her to get him in and out of the cart, which would allow me to have a life.

In my heart of hearts however, I wasn't convinced and without explicitly expressing my doubts, I felt that we were perhaps clutching at straws. It became evident that neither Mum or I wanted to lose this little dog that had brought such happiness and joy into our lives, but at what cost?

Apart from me, my Mum was the next person Digby trusted and so we did try on one occasion with the muzzle try to lift him into the cart. Unfortunately, it was a none starter, as Digby reacted in only what I can describe as a frenzied state. This little dog was scared and I knew then that enough was enough.

The next day I had no doubts, but to go and speak with my vet who was very approachable and who I had confided in before with regards to his fear based aggression. I left Digby in the car as I went in to speak with her. I had to be strong as we discussed my options, which included euthanasia.

After I left the vets that evening, I took Digby for his last ever walk and when I put him in his crate in the back of my car, I sat on the back with the doors open and looked up at the moon and cried. I was beginning to feel a distinct detachment now going on and I knew that this is what was needed in order for us to both move forward with our lives.

I remember lying in bed that night and thinking, 'wouldn't it be great if my husband and I could get to a point where we both felt okay about having Digby put to sleep, rather than guilty'. As a counsellor, I believed this could be possible.

In any case, we had decided to shelve any decision until a couple more months, to see how far Digby had improved and whether it was enough to give him the best life.

Little did I know that fate would take over and make that decision for us.

On the morning of Wednesday 11th January 2012, Digby was off his food and sluggish in his cart. I got into the shower, only to jump back out, when I heard him screech. I found him in the kitchen looking fa lawn, he had been physically sick. This wasn't good as I recalled events of his first disc herniation. I rang my vet and booked an afternoon appointment in the event that I needed to take him down after work, whilst my Mum came in at lunch to monitor him.

There wasn't much change on my return home and felt that it was best that I took him in for a check over.

It was actually quite difficult for the vet to say either way whether it was a further disc herniation, but gave him a strong pain relief and asked us to monitor him overnight.

I got Digby home and it was clear that he was struggling to get back up on his rear legs. After my

Mum left for the evening, I made my bed up beside him in the kitchen and got some clothes ready in the event that I needed to take him in the middle of the night.

Digby could not settle and come midnight, the medication was starting to wear off as he started to make a distressed whining sound, which I equally found distressing. I knew I had to remain calm for him, but knew too that it was going to be the last night we spent together, as my husband and I had already made the decision, that if it were to happen again, we would need to have him put to rest.

At 1am, I rang the vet and she told me to bring him straight down, which we did. Without an xray, it was very difficult to diagnose another disc herniation, but she told us if she had to put money on it, then it was highly likely. I made the decision to leave Digby at the vets for the remainder of the evening in order that they could monitor him and administer pain relief.

We spent the rest of the night awake, drinking tea, reminiscing as to all the special times we had shared, but knowing too that we were going to have to say goodbye to our little man come light. This was very surreal, but I knew I had to be strong for Digby and allow him to move forward with his journey and me with mine.

When we collected him from the on call vets to transport him to our resident vet, I was told that he had had a comfortable night and that he had shown no aggression at all. I knew that Digby without his medication was in serious pain, as he had shown no aggression the first time round.

We asked to have him sedated to make his passing more comfortable and when they carried him out, he looked so adorable in his drowsy, sedated state.

I always told Digby that when Mummy's time comes, for him to be waiting at the gates of heaven for me. And sure enough, in those last moments, that is what I told him.

He was in my heart, the best little doggy in the whole wide world. I had always wanted a black and tan dachshund, but little did I know just to what lengths he would test me and just how impactive he would be to my life.

I don't regret all the time, patience and effort given this last 6 months. No one ever really knows where the road will lead when we start out on a journey like this. And if we don't try, we don't know. Digby was one courageous and determined little soul who came into my life for a reason and for that I am proud.

My lasting legacy to a great friend and companion 'Digby'

So what have the last six months of our lives been about, if we weren't successful in bringing about a full recovery to such a well loved dog?

Quite simply, if I can share our efforts to help raise awareness to other dachshunds and their owners, then it makes the last 6 months completely worthwhile. As we weren't the first and sadly won't be the last.

Firstly, I have to acknowledge that this was a huge undertaking that no one could have completely prepared me for. The territory was relatively unknown with no guarantees, thus making it an emotional, mental and financial risk.

I wrote at the start of this article that I was quick to buy Digby without perhaps checking out all

important health issues in the pedigree line and I feel now, knowing what I do, that there would be certain questions that I would ask, as and when the time comes to own another dachshund, which may in turn reduce the risk of acquiring a puppy with IVDD or other known health issues with this breed. The Dachshund Breed Council have excellent articles which can assist and I would recommend these with this process.

One absolute must is to pay into a reputable life long insurance, which proved to be an absolute god send on this occasion, as had we not had it, we would have had no option than to go down the euthanasia route. This type of insurance covers you for the duration of your pet's life and you can claim for an ongoing condition, whereas other insurances are limited.

As time is of the essence with IVDD, you are told little of what may be realistically required of you once an operation to decompress the spine has taken place and whilst it would be unfair to hold any neurologist accountable for their prognosis, I do feel strongly that this is perhaps an area that needs further discussion with the dog's owner/s, before a decision to operate vs euthanasia is made, as we all have limitations as to what we can cope with/afford given the lives we lead.

In Digby's case, I personally regret not having made myself aware of the classic symptoms of disc herniation and how to respond, as had I have known just how much time plays a part in the long term prognosis, I would have insisted that Digby was referred immediately the next morning to the Animal Health Trust and not some 36 hours later. I felt that this was an oversight by the vet who was on call over the weekend and I do wonder whether had we acted sooner, whether things might have turned out differently.

Also consideration needs to be given to the overall state of the spine and in Digby's case, there were in fact other weak discs, which potentially could herniate at any time, which on hind sight tells me that time was in fact limited. Whilst I don't regret having Digby for an extra 6 months, I do feel that had we been better informed regarding the disease and the likelihood of further herniations, we could have perhaps made a more balanced decision, which in turn would of saved time, effort, money and indeed heartache.

Ultimately it's the animals quality of life that should take priority, but one does need to consider your own life and the impact such intense rehabilitation brings and so under certain scenarios, it might be the kindest thing in the long term to opt for the euthanasia route.

With that said, some dachshunds can live full and long lives in carts in the event full motor function does not return, as is the case with 'Frankie, 'The Walk n Roll Dog', but consideration needs to be given as to whether your lifestyle can accommodate such a scenario, as it is no easy task to undertake.

Barbara and Frankie were a real inspiration to me throughout this process. They gave me hope, encouragement and the the determination to soldier on and for that I will be eternally grateful.

So this was our story, which sadly was no fairytale, but I hope has given you the dachshund owner a realistic overview of what it is like to live with and rehabilitate a dachshund with IVDD.

I feel passionate about these little dogs and am in support of a compulsory breeding program here in the UK, which in time may significantly reduce the disease from breeding lines, which is distressing for all.

I remain comforted by the fact that Digby is no longer in pain and whilst he was only on the earth

for a relatively short time, he did live a very full life and was loved beyond words.

I will always be indebted for the love, joy and lessons he taught me and feel that through me, he will continue to help other dachshunds and their owners from afar.

Go well my friend.

**In Memory of
'Digby'
23rd February 2007 to 12th January 2012
R.I.P**



Links

www.dodgerlist.com

www.joyfulpaws.com

www.eddieswheels.com

www.dachshundbreedcouncil.wordpress.com

[http://wholisticpawsvet.com/articles/Integrative Treatment of Dogs with Intervertebral Disc Disease.pdf](http://wholisticpawsvet.com/articles/Integrative_Treatment_of_Dogs_with_Intervertebral_Disc_Disease.pdf)

<http://www.dodgerslist.com/literature/FridgeInfo81907.pdf>

Contact

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Written with many a tear shed between 4/2/12 & 6/2/12