

ROD HUMPHRIES WRITES . . .

THE CARDIOMYOPATHY CHRONICLES 2: A PERSONAL STORY AND A CHALLENGE.

Sometimes it seems we are trapped in an old western movie. The dreaded villain and his gang have taken over the town and we are nervously awaiting the cavalry to charge over the hill to save us. But the cavalry is too far away to help. We have to protect the town ourselves...

In our Doberman town the villain is dilated cardiomyopathy, relentlessly cutting a swathe through the population. The cavalry is the scientific community. The word in the late 1990s was that the cavalry was only months away. Almost 10 years later they are still working feverishly to isolate the gene, or genes, to help us with a genetic test and at some point they will arrive with bugles blaring and flags flying. But that moment could be years into the future, maybe not in my lifetime or yours. We simply cannot wait because the very future of our town is at stake.

I wear my heart on my sleeve. Today I will write about the hearts of my dogs; all NINE of them cut down by the dreaded villain in my very home. I am going to name names and list pedigrees because, quite simply, it is the right thing to do when you care about performing good service for the breed on your watch. By so doing I will hopefully encourage, pressure, prod, coax, cajole or simply unearth or unbind kindred spirits who are passionate enough about our breed to fight back with me.

Breeders must develop their own open registry, a database, where we can share pedigree information to

at least slow this juggernaut down until the cavalry rides over the hill. Otherwise there may be a breed so in tatters that there will be little left to save even after a test is developed. So embedded is this disease it will take generations – maybe 20 or more years – to clean it out once we have a definitive DNA test.

I don't want to be Gary Cooper in his Oscar winning role as the town sheriff in the 1952 western classic *High Noon*. I don't want to stand alone against the villains who are already in town and the vicious killer who will arrive on the noon train to join them. I don't want to be abandoned by the timid town folks who reject the fight because they are selfishly thinking only of their own well being.

I am not a hero or a martyr and I do not seek sympathy for the loss of so many dogs. I am just passionate about the Doberman which I consider to be in great peril. And as the person who planned and brought them into this world, I also owe it to all my wonderful friends who suffered and died from this disease. Breeders and owners owe it to all our animals – including those yet unborn -- to abandon the secrecy of the dog show culture and work together for a solution. The least we can all do is share information for the common good.

“Do not forsake me oh my darling.....”

A Saga of Death

April 15 — when the tax man cometh — is never a good day. April 15, 2002 is a day which will, for another reason, haunt me forever.

I get emotional even thinking about the death of Ricochet, or “Shay,” Bikila’s Ricochet of Marks-Tey, from dilated cardiomyopathy (DCM)—which was not my first or my last. The death was inevitable. It is the way she left this world that is indelibly etched in my mind’s eye. I let her down.

In the beginning I was guilty of underestimating the disease. When my beloved black male Ch. Bikila’s Jet Setter of Marks-Tey was diagnosed with dilated cardiomyopathy and died months later — chasing squirrels despite the obvious symptoms — at six years of age in 1993, I still thought I could control the situation. I did what was right by telling the owner of the stud who sired Jet Setter and those who had used him at stud that he had died

of dilated cardiomyopathy. I referenced it in magazine advertisements and articles and even published the information in a book in 1999. Also, I did not personally breed any of his offspring in the Bikila/Marks-Tey program.

In the early 1990s there was no settled science on the mode of inheritance, so I erroneously assumed, because most diseases are autosomal recessive, that I was faced with the same mode and therefore calcu-

lated that I had a bitch (who ironically did not die of DCM) who was a carrier for the disease. I did not consider it would dramatically affect my overall breeding program. I was already planning to diversify my breeding options, turning to other similar lines, other studs, to help build my kennel in America and, as we say in my native Australia: I was all right, mate...

Eight years and a bunch of litters later, everything was far from all right, mate. Bikila's Nemo of Marks-Tey, a robust dog just shy of his 10th birthday, who had never shown clinical signs of the disease, died of heart failure while running on my property in Texas in April, 2001. Nemo was a big red male whom I had kept simply because I loved the animal. I had no desire to show or breed him. He was not in the breeding program so there was no direct impact. After Jet Setter, the familial consequences raised a red flag.

I did not have long to wait. A mere 10 months later in February, 2002, Nemo's sister, the red bitch Bikila's Nadia of Marks-Tey, an integral part of my breeding program, was found dead on my property – also with no prior clinical signs of the disease. The alarm bells were now quite deafening.

Even though she had turned 10 years old, it was not hard to figure what had killed her. The old standby

excuse, “well, they are going to die of something,” did not sit right with me then and certainly does not sit right with me now. If you have cardiomyopathy, you have cardiomyopathy. Age does not lessen the effect or the threat to a breeding program or the breed as a whole. If anybody thinks that it is all right for dogs to die of cardiomyopathy at 10-plus years of age then they should heed a warning from my personal story. Dogs who die with DCM at what some consider is an “acceptable age” are likely to produce victims of the disease who are three, four or five years of age. It happened to me...

Within a few weeks of Nadia's death, a real nightmare began to unfold in my kennel. Three young bitches, four and five years of age and all sired by Nadia's son – 1996 DPCA National Specialty Award of Merit winner, Ch. Bikila's Qanah of Marks-Tey – out of three different mothers, one after another began showing classic symptoms of congestive heart failure: loss of appetite and weight; ascites (build up of fluid in the abdomen); some coughing from fluid on the lungs; and syncope (fainting spells). Sometimes they would stumble slightly and bump into objects.

The black bitch, Bikila's Ricochet of Marks-Tey, who was to have her initial breeding in the coming months, was the first to show signs.

I was devastated and my love of the animal prompted me to keep her alive for the time being – to give her some quality of life within acceptable bounds as I had done with Jet Setter – before euthanization. What followed is painfully haunting. When life comes to an end it should be a peaceful transition.

It was late on the night of April 14, 2002, when Ricochet suddenly collapsed on the kennel floor, seemingly in a coma. She did not move, but she was still breathing and her eyes continued to take in her surroundings. I made her comfortable and sat with her for several hours. It was too late to ask my vet and longtime friend, Dr. Tucker Robinson, to come to the house. Also, she looked peaceful enough to where I thought the euthanization could wait until first thing in the morning. I left a message on his office answering machine and finally went to grab a few hours of sleep.

Ricochet was still in the same position when I returned in the early morning. When the vet arrived and was about to administer the lethal dose, she suddenly rose up screaming and fighting with all her might. The scream was chilling; a mix of defiance, fear and a plaintiff cry for help.

I had a very close friend, a great International and World Cup Soccer star who, while lying on his death



My program received a triple blow when these three beautiful young bitches, Richocet, Samantha and Ulrika were lost in quick succession from cardiomyopathy.

bed with mere minutes left of life, suddenly rose up and began fighting his brothers. This was eerily similar and shook me to the very core of my soul. I shall never forget wrestling my dear Ricochet into submission while she was being injected.

When the injection finally brought peace, Tucker glanced toward a half-sister of Ricochet, a red bitch, Bikila's Samantha of Marks-Tey. I had been distracted in recent weeks and had not noticed the slight paunch on Samantha. "I think you should bring her into the clinic and have her checked out," he said. Soon afterwards he put a stethoscope on Samantha and then slipped a long needle into her abdomen, drawing out fluid. "I'm sorry Rod, she has it too."

Samantha was put to sleep two months after Ricochet. Five months after Sam, another young half-sister, the black bitch, Bikila's Ulrika of Marks-Tey, was euthanized with congestive heart failure.

It didn't end there, not by a long shot. Only nine months after Ulrika was put to sleep, Qanah's brother, an eight-year-old black male, Bikila's Quasar of Marks-Tey, co-owned with my friend and former major league baseball pitcher, Scipio Spinks, and his wife, Jeanette, was brought home to be euthanized and buried with his family on my property. Quasar's symptoms were confirmed as obvious congestive heart failure, the same as Jet's and the three young bitches. So poor was the heart pumping mechanism that it seemingly took forever for the lethal dose to take effect.

Two months later, in October 2003, Ricochet's mother, Ch. Bikila's Pandora of Marks-Tey was found dead on the property, another victim of heart failure who had shown no clinical signs. She was three weeks shy of her 10th birthday.

From Nadia in February of 2002 to Pandora in October of 2003, the grim tally was six top dogs dead from

heart failure at my home. Counting the two earlier deaths of Jet Setter and Nemo, I had lost a devastating eight animals from the disease.

Because of the late onset of the disease, all the breedings for the dead animals had taken place **before** the first real alarm bell sounded with the death of Nemo in 2001. I had planned to breed Ricochet, Sam and Ulrika, but in the circumstances one has to be thankful they were not bred.

The explosion of cardiomyopathy left me with no brood bitches, only older or spayed animals. To add to my personal despair was the death in June 1999, of the junior class winner at the 1996 DPCA National, Bikila's Quintilla of Marks-Tey. Tia died after a six month long battle with histoplasmosis (an internal fungal disease contracted while being shown in the Mississippi Valley) which had invaded her body and could not be stopped by chemotherapy in a weak immune system. I had gone from a string of outstanding

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potential brood bitches to absolutely nothing. I was shaken. It was time for other things. My youngest son Justin had been drafted out of high school to play professional baseball for the Houston Astros organization and I followed him around the country and threw myself into a baseball book.

My friend and a top Doberman breeder, Nikki McClendon of Merrimac kennels, saw me drifting out of the breed and offered a black bitch puppy, a grand daughter of Jet Setter, Merrimac's Shanghai Sling of Bikila. I took the bitch with no plans other than to enjoy a young Doberman again. There was the

potential risk associated with her being the grand daughter of a cardiomyopathy victim, but I had no plans to breed her.

I had kept a fawn dog, a full brother of Ricochet, Bikila's Rowdy of Marks-Tey, a loyal friend and companion who I also had no intention of ever breeding. Rowdy was close to his ninth birthday when the unthinkable happened. He had never been bred and suddenly he mated and tied the 2-year-old black bitch in a clandestine tryst. I had totally underestimated the old guy. Talk about a 40 (or 50) year-old virgin!

I really didn't think the breeding would take. Even so my first reaction was to have it aborted. There had been a seven-year break from breeding; I had lost a kennel full of dogs from cardiomyopathy; and Rowdy being fawn meant all the pups would carry the dilution factor to boot.

My mind churned and then, ever so slowly, I began questioning myself. I asked if I was really ready

to give it all up. This would be my last chance to have dogs from my bloodline produce me a litter. I had been working at it since the mid 1960's. Was it time? OK, Rowdy was fawn but a very good specimen and likely, because of his heritage, to produce me at least several quality offspring. And the prospective mother was black with a red recessive and no dilution factor which meant there would be no fawn puppies. I even questioned if this extraordinary turn of events meant a higher being was trying to help me; trying to tell me something!