

Living...

with
Lymphoma

by Dr. Linda M. Fowler

I am not sure why I was not particularly concerned about Cachet's initial biopsy, but our experienced veterinarian told me that she had never seen growths like this before. So I assumed it was some type of weird benign tumors.

Cachet had been a healthy dog most of her life, except for her bad habit of eating undesirable items.... toys, paper towels, etc. After her show career ended, she returned home and subsequently whelped two lovely litters. However, when we cut back on her food while weaning the second litter, she decided to eat a rug in her crate! This of course necessitated surgery and a hasty recovery while her pups were still in our home.

Since that time she had remained disease free and happy. She had adapted quickly to water work and was awarded her Apprentice title on her first attempt. We planned to start working on her next title in the Spring.

Around the holidays, I began to notice that she was straining to pass her stool. Just a slight problem at first, then her stools narrowed in shape and finally she was straining so hard that I was afraid she would prolapse her rectum.

When my vet did a digital check of her rectum, she explained that there were large lobules that were impeding the passage of waste. So, we elected to have several of the largest growths removed and of course biopsies would be sent off.

When I answered the phone and heard my vet say, "I have bad news for you," my heart sank.

"Cachet has lymphoma."

Oh no, not again... My first PWD died of lymphoma only days after his ninth birthday, following extensive surgery in an attempt to clear his organs of the disease. Cachet was only eight, but I had vowed after my first experience never to go through the heroics of trying to save a dog in a non-salvageable situation.

My veterinarian and I discussed options. She said she would refer me to the Specialty Clinic or felt comfortable giving chemotherapy in her office utilizing the "Wisconsin protocol." After careful consideration as to whether I even wanted to travel the "chemo route," I elected to have my general vet administer the chemo for several reasons. The first being that I have a wonderful veterinarian, who aside from rendering outstanding traditional animal care, also utilizes acupuncture, herbal therapy and other alternative care modes in her practice. Second, I believed that Cachet would be more comfortable in an environment she already knew. And last, a very legitimate concern for most of us, was the cost factor.

Cachet began her chemotherapy treatments the end of January. She was handling the weekly visits very well and the rectal tumors had already disappeared. Cachet even competed in the Veteran Sweeps at our supported entry in February. Her coat had already begun to literally fall out, but there was enough to get her presentable for the ring. She performed so well that it was remarkable and she even managed to win BOVIS under a breeder judge.

As the treatments went on the time frames between the administrations were increasing. Cachet never seemed to let any of it bother her. She was always happy to see her vet and remained still and relaxed during the intravenous treatments. Of course there were occasional side effects of nausea, etc., but all-in-all, she was quite the trooper.

Six months into her chemo, my vet requested that she have a "full body" ultrasound for two reasons. First to ascertain as to whether there were any tumors present at the time and to evaluate the status of her heart, which could suffer side effects from the medications. Upon this exam, she had no evidence of any problems.



Cachet with sparse hair earning her WWD while on chemotherapy.

With water work season around the corner, I began working Cachet in preparation for the Working level. I can remember one of my cohorts asking, "Why are you working with her, she probably won't even live until our trial?" I know the comment was not made with any malice, but it stung and just made me more determined that this feisty and brave bitch was going to give it her all.

And indeed she did! The first day of our trial in July, although balding and still on chemotherapy, Cachet was entered in Working. I informed the water trial judge of Cachet's condition, and that this might necessitate, because of her diminished stamina, short rests between exercises. I was told it would be no problem.

As we warmed up, I could feel her excitement... a chance to "compete." The joy of practicing with a close-knit

At left: Cachet competing in the Veterans Class at the 2011 National Specialty.

continued next page

Living with Lymphoma continued

group of friends is that they understand your frustrations, but simultaneously take pleasure in your successes. When Cachet and I entered the testing area, a hush fell on the crowd. As she went through her “paces,” she never missed a beat. The performance was flawless and there was not a dry eye in “the house.” It was total joy for both of us!!!

In August (after eight months), Cachet completed her chemotherapy, but remained on Prednisone. Unfortunately, she already had a ravenous appetite, but the steroids only accentuated her hunger. In January, a year from her initial diagnosis, Cachet had another clear body ultrasound.

While I was out of town the following April and Cachet was under the care of my house/dog sitter, she ate a large portion of a towel in her crate. It was immediately obvious (having been there before) that she obstructed her bowel. By the time my vet was available to do the surgery, Cachet had necrosed a large portion of her bowel and a four foot section of her intestines were removed. It was also a chance to biopsy Cachet’s gastrointestinal tract. The good news was there was no evidence of cancer, but she did have IBD, which certainly was not surprising with the previous presence of the lymphoma.

That summer we decided to somewhat back off Cachet’s training for Courier water work.

But as I prepared her housemate for his Working title, Cachet insisted on joining practice sessions, even as she was recovering from her extensive abdominal surgery. It was a good year after the initial scare of the obstruction. Cachet remained vibrant and healthy.

Cachet’s coat has never fully recovered from the chemotherapy. She has small bald areas and the consistency is soft



Cachet’s coat prior to chemotherapy.

and “fly away”, but I managed to grow it enough to enter her in our supported entry in February. She was almost ten years old and I showed her once again in the Veteran Sweepstakes. Outside the ring, as we practiced her gaiting, it was a nice pace for an older dog and I felt confident she would enjoy the experience. After the initial examination when the judge asked us to move, OFF SHE WENT with all the gusto she could muster, literally dragging me behind! Yes, my little girl was definitely in her element and she was taking every chance to savor it! Her performance was so outstanding that she was awarded BVIS by yet another breeder judge!

By then Cachet’s attitude was “Well, what is next?” So we began working on her Courier exercises that Spring. She had adapted well to all of the exercises, except, of course, the ball drop. However, in July we entered her in our trial. She did beautifully the first day completing all of the exercises, but the last. The next day, she was not quite as exuberant. By the time we went to our second trial in August, Cachet gave me a message loud and clear, “Mom, I want to swim and have fun, but I’m just too tired to do that entire Courier exercise.” Yes, indeed the little “Eveready Bunny’s” stamina had begun to diminish or so I thought.....

October was the National Specialty. So close to home we could not miss it! I was somewhat hesitant to enter Cachet. On a routine exam the month before, we discovered that her liver enzymes were elevated. She did have a urinary tract infection at that time, but even after that cleared the enzymes remained up. She was placed on “liver strengthening” medication.

The Specialty festivities constitute a long week for dogs, but because I did manage to keep Cachet in a semblance of coat, I did enter her in the Veteran Sweeps and Class. She was going to be shown by her favorite handler, so I would have the opportunity to see her perform.



Cachet’s sparse coat at a water trial, while on chemotherapy.

She did indeed put on quite a show! Confident, happy and energized, she managed to win her class in Sweeps and garnish a second in her Veteran class. She was “pumped up” and excited to be there. I was indeed happy that she had the opportunity to participate.

Upon our return home we continued to monitor Cachet’s condition. She had a liver function study that was normal, but it became apparent that she was going to need a liver biopsy, just so we would know what was causing the problem. So, once again, in December, Cachet required a general anesthesia with torso and sides shaved with a #40 (vet) blade. The phenomenal news was that there was no cancer. However, the cause for the liver inflammation is the steroid therapy.

We have attempted to decrease her Prednisone dosage, but that resulted in gastrointestinal symptoms, such as diarrhea. So, the bottom line at this time is that she is enjoying the life she has. Cachet completes retrieval exercises every day in the yard, enjoys running at our home with her housemate, likes occasional shorter walks and can not wait to get back in the water this summer.

In January, we celebrated Cachet’s third year since her initial lymphoma diagnosis. It’s a date that has become more important than her March birthday – when she turned 11 years old. Two weeks later, she competed in her first obedience competition (without any class training) to earn her BN (Beginner Novice obedience title)!

Yes....Cachet has been fortunate, but what her story helps us understand is that regardless of the horror stories we have heard about lymphoma, regardless of the pain we might have previously gone through dealing with this “killer,” we all still have HOPE....

Regardless of the outcome for our future, not only has Cachet survived lymphoma, she has truly LIVED and these three years have truly been a blessing.



Cachet’s coat a year after chemotherapy.

COMMENT from the CANCER COMMITTEE

I encouraged Linda Fowler to describe Cachet’s experience with chemotherapy, so that all PWDCA members could better understand both the negatives and positives of this treatment. There is one particular point in Linda’s article I would like to emphasize. Chemotherapy for lymphoma is standardized and can be administered by a local veterinarian with the veterinary oncologist consulting. This is frequently more cost-effective and less stressful on the owner and their affected PWD, since travel is not involved.

The statistics for standard chemotherapy for non-Hodgkin’s canine lymphoma is that less than 20% of all dogs treated will survive 2 years. However recent changes in oncology should improve these results dramatically. The traditional separation between veterinary and human oncology has been eliminated by the National Cancer Institute’s Comparative Oncology program begun in 2006. One of the first fruits of this collaboration in treating canine lymphoma was reported in February 2012 by MD Anderson Hospital and the Texas A&M Veterinary School. Expanded T cell infusions (a human treatment developed at MD Anderson) were given to dogs undergoing standard lymphoma chemotherapy at Texas A&M. The results demonstrated a fourfold survival increase in the dogs with lymphoma compared to chemotherapy alone. This developing partnership between human and veterinary oncology should yield much better cancer treatments for all our companion animals.

David E. Smith MD
Chair, PWDCA Cancer Committee

I wish to acknowledge the support of Dr. Rosemary Branson, her associate Dr. Davida Roof and the staff of the Blythewood Animal Hospital, who have truly been my partners in maintaining Cachet’s health. A picture of Cachet competing in the water is displayed in their lobby and she is literally their “poster child” for lymphoma.

– Dr. Linda M. Fowler