**"THE VERY COLDEST DAY EVER"**

**Northwest Notes / THE LABRADOR QUARTERLY - Winter 2011-2012**

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It was fast becoming one of the coldest early winters of all-time North of Seattle and this  Winter-Break (they used to call it 'Christmas vacation' when I was young...), for the schools was one of the longest ever because of snowfall.

Every morning at sunrise, I am blessed to take dogs from their overnight crates, grab my walking stick and walk across one of my 5 acre fields and onto the 'Pond Driveway' and onto  a path through numerous large fields used to cut grass for dairy cows feed. We did this every morning no matter the weather and it was actually fun to experience our morning walk through pure white snow and absolute quiet of this stunning morning..... The sun on the new fallen snow gave the magical appearance of thousands of diamonds sparkling brilliantly.

This particular morning, it was a bit tough to walk as the snowpack was almost up to my knees... The morning walk was going to take quite a lot longer today or, I might have to cut it a little short as this was tough going.  Today having the day off work, I had lots of time to enjoy the winter wonderland and stop whenever I needed to rest. What fun to watch the dogs chase each other through the fresh powder or go crazy searching for a thrown snowball ! My youngest son and I were living here at the time and he was at high school wrestling practice.

My legs were getting tired trudging the almost half mile we'd probably walked, and we were on the route back, coming up to the water area for a rest before we started through the last five acres to the house. Suddenly, there was the piercing sound of two shot gun blasts coming from in front and to the North.  My very special dog, “ Gander ', left the other dogs and I and flew to the edge of the pond. The entire surface of the two-acre pond was frozen and covered with a dusting of powdered snow.  I gave it my best to run through the heavy snow to the edge of the pond as “ Gander ' had seen the ducks fall onto the ice and he was running over the ice to retrieve.... My next thought should the pond be frozen was that I'd had seen my neighbors ice skating on the pond when it was frozen in winter's past. My  thoughts then were that he'll pick up whatever it is and we'll be on our way back to the house. The snow was heavy, and each step was such an effort as I was already very tired...  As I finally reached the edge, I was horrified to see my beloved dog fallen through the ice and though holding the bird,  he was turning in circles within a hole about 5 feet in diameter !

The other dogs with me were wanting to go out onto the ice also (his puppy son was almost about ten feet out), and I yelled, “No, wait!”  As I called and called to “ Gander ”,  it was obvious that the ice was too thick for his body weight to break it, and as he would pull his chest onto the ledge, the ice would not give and he would slide back into the water.  I made the decision to run the other dogs back to the house (about 600 yards from the side of the pond we were on), and  I trudged through the deep snow, calling the other dogs as I was  breathing so very heavy.  Reaching the kennel, I put the other dogs away. With no neighbors likely home within 20 acres, I 'decided' to run upstairs to my son's room and grabbed weights from his weight bench; back down the stairs in my rubber boots and 'out-of-no-where', had new energy to run back out to the pond's edge (from my property's side).  I was so exhausted, I can't believe that I then tried to throw the weights out onto the ice,  hoping to break it between the edge and the dog. (Don't know if I told you Zach, the part about losing your weights or not...cc:Zach) The weights either slid somewhere like a curling rink stone or I think a couple of them actually broke through but not where I needed them to.

The dog was still holding the duck and  paddling in circles but very slowly now.

As I now cried and panted in exhaustion, I dropped to my knees as I could only watch as he was now resting his chin on the ice ledge and  barely floating above the water. I continued calling him through the sobs in total exhaustion and I prayed. Time stood still.

Just then, I heard my son being dropped off in the driveway after high school sports practice. I turned toward the house and began yelling for Zach and soon, he was walking out toward me yelling, “What's going on?”

He reached me, saw Gander in the water just floating and as I tried to tell him what happened, he screamed, “WHO was shooting?”   I pointed to where the shots came from on the other side and from a group of trees directly across from us. My son Zach took off, jumped a 5-foot ditch and ran over to see who might be in the trees. All-of-a-sudden, I see Zach run to the edge of the clump of trees and begin pulling a small boat by a rope.  I'm on my knees in the deep snow watching across the pond and only about 400 feet away, when the next thing I see is a man who I don't know and holding a shot gun,  following my son and threatening him with a loud voice “To drop HIS boat !”  In a quick moment of panic and total disbelief, I thought 'I might watch my son  be assaulted AND watch my beloved dog drown, totally unable to do anything about it'.  With Zach on his knees in the little boat, he began taking super-strong, 'bench-pressing' arms and using the or in the boat and chopped a pathway out to “ Gander ”.  Almost as Zach reached him, the dog began swimming out the path created and wobbled up onto shore (with the bird )!

Zach picked him up and at 6'4”, had an easier time walking through the 20” of snow than I had and we did our best to hurry back to the house.

As we reached the house and had quickly stoked up the wood-stove fire and began toweling him off, we began talking about 'the man'. Zach didn't remember him there as he exited the ice and picked “ Gander ” up. We dried our very cold dog rubbing him with towels and also gently applied the hair dryer.   Zach started pestering me to call the sheriff and, after “ Gander ” was warmed up and drinking tepid water, we phoned.  To my surprise and within about 20 minutes, (considering the weather conditions), the deputy arrived and was quite concerned. He sat by the wood stove and petted “ Gander ' most of the time he took his report. He kept saying, “What a remarkable dog !”

I don't remember now whether they identified the mystery man or not. My neighbors do occasionally hunt a bit on their own properties, but the key word is 'own'.  We spent the rest of that day giving thanks and telling our remarkable story to whomever would listen. I was blessed to watch the innate drive and perseverance  of this wonderful Labrador , Am.Can.CH.Cedarwoods Master Gunner, WC.   I was blessed for Zach to have come home when he did and for the physical heartiness of this fabulous dog who went onto live another ten years with us. I was blessed to have such an experience and outcome to share with my teenage son.  I do think, every time I stop at the pond and think back to that morning, it was THE coldest day I've experienced yet with a very warm ending.