

A devastating diagnosis upended a veterinarian's life. Agility helped her heal.



Playing Through Pain

Kim Krueger was in a great mood the morning of the 2022 Douglas County Fair. The veterinarian loaded up her dogs, goats, and children and headed to the fairgrounds, excited for competition and fair fun, when her phone rang.

Then Krueger heard the words that would turn her world upside down: She had cancer.

"I was diagnosed on August 1 with invasive ductal carcinoma, grade 2,"

Krueger recalls. "I had no symptoms. It was found on a routine mammogram. It was in a weird spot that was hard to palpate."

Instead of canceling the fair plans, Krueger and her family decided to forge ahead and enjoy the exhibitions.

"It was a great distraction while I got all the testing done to have my surgery. My son competed in conformation, obedience, rally, and agility," she says. "I had surgery on August 22 when my kids were starting their third week of

middle school."

Krueger took the month of September off work to recover from surgery, but, much like how she stuck with the fair plans, she continued competing with her Bearded Collies.

"I decided to keep running agility while undergoing treatments, because life goes on. My dogs still needed exercise and stimulation," Krueger says. "But mostly I needed a reason to get up and keep training them. It was one of the best decisions."

Kim Krueger soars over hurdles with the help of her heart dog, River. Running agility has helped her deal with her cancer treatments.



GETTING TO GOLD

Krueger has been involved with dog sports for more than 30 years and discovered the Bearded Collie while in high school.

“My mom and I rescued a dog that we adored but realized she needed training. We were hooked, and I got her CD,” she says. “We saw a Bearded Collie at an obedience trial and loved the look of it. We got one! She had the funniest personality. They are such smart dogs.”

Krueger had the first Bearded Collie in Colorado to earn both an obedience title and a herding title, which she achieved while in veterinary school in the mid-’90s. Her current agility partner is River, who is

7 1/2 years old and also a therapy dog who visits cancer wards and infusion centers.

“River is my heart dog. She would lay in bed with me when I felt so awful,” Krueger says. “But she was always ready to go run agility.”

Along with continuing classes and trials, Krueger joined a team with the new AKC Agility League program, and that became the best therapy for keeping a positive attitude.

“I was so excited when I was invited to join the team,” Krueger says. “It was a time when I really needed something good, and it provided that for me.”

The league teams are composed of three to eight dogs and compete on their home

fields or at their local training facilities. They run six courses over the 12-week league season along with other teams around the country.

She became a member of the Golden Star Golden Girls of Sedalia, Colorado, which runs in the Limited division, featuring shorter courses for smaller spaces.

“I have known a lot of the agility people since I was a vet student in the ’90s. They are my friends. Some days I couldn’t even run, but that was OK,” she says. “I walked through the course and somehow made it. It was a time when I could escape being a cancer patient. I got to just go run with my dog and hang with my friends.”

KEN GEE PHOTOGRAPHY



The Healing Power of Setting Goals and Doing What You Love

*Heeling and Healing:
Dr. Brenda Riemer, seen
here with Liza, is an avid dog
sports competitor.*



GOING STRONG

Krueger ran in all six rounds of the league competition without missing a course while undergoing radiation treatments, which ended a week after the league fall season concluded. She and River won the AKC Agility League Clean Sweep award for completing every round fault-free. But the real prize is that her health has steadily improved.

“I am doing pretty well now. I take a daily aromatase inhibitor. I had some really bad migraines and struggled during the month of January,” she says. “We added acupuncture into my treatment plan. That has helped me tremendously.”

Her dogs were a powerful motivator to keep going and get outside, even when she felt ill.

“I feel having our dogs helps us be more positive about life. They are so accepting of us and always happy to see us,” she says. “... Every day I feel better and have more energy.” **FD**

Penny Leigh is the program manager of the AKC GoodDog! Helpline, and competes in agility and obedience.

Being diagnosed with a disease or suffering an injury can be devastating and frightening. But finding ways to keep working toward goals and be active with your dogs can help your attitude and your healing process, says Dr. Brenda Riemer, who holds a doctorate in sports psychology and works with many athletes. Riemer is a longtime dog sports enthusiast, competing in obedience and having earned an OTCH on her Shetland Sheepdog, Liza, plus competing in rally, agility, and more. She also is a new AKC obedience judge and serves as a trial chair for obedience and rally trials.

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Does setting goals and working toward those goals help someone through difficult times and recovery processes?

Goal-setting is one of the greatest tools we have. Setting reasonable goals that are process-oriented helps individuals both succeed at training and showing, but also helps with recovering from illness, injury, and other life events that might have postponed training. The research indicates that when we write goals down, we are more likely to achieve them than if we keep them “in our mind.”

Not only do we need to write the goals down, but we need to be able to measure them. By having measurable goals, a person can see improvement. To use an agility example, we would not have a MACH as our goal. What we would have are items that are the foundation of the sport and what people can measure. For example, we might set a goal about a dog learning weave poles and then learning different weave entrances (right/left). We could set a goal for ourselves to learn back crosses. All these items, once learned, lead to the titles one hopes to earn.

Last, all of us are great at rewarding our dogs. When you are goal-setting, write down how you will reward yourself when you reach each milestone.

What is the positive aspect of staying active and engaged with what you love to do, even through injury or illness?

When we are able to continue with an activity, it helps with how we identify who we are. All of us have multiple factors that contribute to our identity. For example, my identity includes such items as professor and dog trainer. As I approach retirement, my “professor” portion will get smaller and other



aspects of myself will become a stronger part of my identity.

When we have a passion for a sport or hobby, being able to participate in that hobby while we are recovering helps with the sense of self and psychologically helps to keep a positive attitude. What we want to be aware of is making sure we do not overdo an activity so that our bodies can heal. It is a balance to be able to continue to do what you love, but in a smaller amount until you have the strength to be fully active again.

What recommendations do you have for dog sports competitors who are diagnosed with illnesses and want to continue training and competing with their dogs as they are able?

First, listen to your doctors. Do you have an acute illness that will be out of your body in a week? If so, take it easy and skip the show so that you can heal

and you don’t get anyone sick (such as a bad cold or flu).

If you have a diagnosis that is not contagious, train and learn what your body is able to handle as you move through the treatment process. Keep training and showing as much as you want to. If you find you get tired faster, if possible, have someone you can go to shows with so that you do not have to worry about having enough energy to drive home by yourself.

In the past few years, I have been participating in virtual walks (1,000-mile walks), and I can’t tell you what it has been like to see people post photos of themselves receiving chemotherapy and then walking later that same day. Follow your passion. If you can’t run as fast, that’s OK. Enjoy every moment with your dog and your friends while training and at shows. In the long run, that’s what matters.

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