EXCERPT: Leash on Life

Greg Louganis bites back with bestseller-to-be For the Life of Your Dog

March 1, 1999 By Greg Louganis

I owe this book to my dogs and to dogs everywhere. Dogs have always been important players in my life. Sometimes I think I may even owe them my life. Living with HIV, I have come to know personally and intimately the exquisite power of the human/animal bond. I don't need scientific research studies to tell me that when you share a special relationship with animals -- dogs, in my case -- your outlook improves, you enjoy a more fulfilling life, and, most significantly, you are better equipped to heal and to fight off disease. There seems to be a direct link between the human/animal bond and the human immune system, and I have been a beneficiary of that link.

There have been times when I wanted to give up, but my dogs have always been there for me, cheering me on, giving me a reason for getting out of bed in the morning. There are times I can honestly say that these animals, my lifelines and my protectors, have saved my life just as profoundly, just as miraculously, as the medications I take every day. I couldn't have made it without them.

Some of the treatments I've had to go through are pretty harsh. When I feel most scared or insecure, my dogs have been there for me. They sense this and stay closer to me. When my treatments or their side effects are most debilitating, we stay in, snuggle into bed and watch TV, and the dogs don't leave my side. Tell me dogs aren't family.

The highest compliment my dogs can give me is to let me know that they consider me to be their family, too. Dogs know when someone in the family is hurting. I often think of when I was taking care of my dad during the last weeks of his life during his struggle with cancer. One day, I took him for a walk in his wheelchair with my Great Dane, Freeway. Freeway stayed with my dad, not at my side like he usually would. He stayed at my dad's side. When we stopped, he sat down and put his head over my father's arm, which is the dog equivalent of putting a hand on your shoulder. He knew my dad needed him. My dad reached out and petted him and said, "I wish I was more mobile so I could have a dog." I said, "Dad, we're here. He's our dog." Freeway knew we were all family. He knew he was comforting my father. Anyone who has had a dog as a companion knows moments like that.

Volunteering can satisfy the need for a puppy fix. I became a volunteer for an organization called Pets are Wonderful Support (PAWS), which helps people with HIV care for their pets. Volunteering for an organization like PAWS -- or one that helps older people with their pets, an animal shelter, or

any group that helps animals and their people -- is a great way to get a puppy fix in a positive way.With a lot of these organizations, you have to be serious about your intentions to help.

When I first contacted PAWS, I said, “OK! Put me to work!” But I had to prove myself. Being a dog walker, for example, required being available every day, which was more of a time commitment than I could handle, so I decided to do grooming.

The time I spent as a volunteer with PAWS was a really eye-opening experience for me. I remember one woman who had a Doberman, a really great dog. He was an older guy, and they really lived just for each other. They were like mirrors of each other, so perfectly matched, both with wonderful personalities, energetic and enthusiastic. What was probably most amazing about this couple was that they were both going blind. But that didn’t matter. They were so bonded, so in tune with each other that they refused to feel sorry for themselves. I didn’t worry about them for a minute. I knew that that dog was in good hands -- and the woman was in good paws.

I loved being a mobile groomer for PAWS, helping to make sure that people living with HIV could continue to keep and take care of their dogs. But there was more to it than that. Going into peoples’ homes as I did, I witnessed special bonds between people and dogs that I don’t think I’ve ever seen quite so vividly before. A lot of the dogs I groomed were older dogs, and there was a wonderful aura of wisdom about them. They had been with their people for a very long time and had struggled for years with them through some very difficult situations. Because of this, they shared a bond that’s hard even to describe.

You have to maintain a healthy attitude toward showing, which means keeping your sense of humor about it. The dogs need that. Everyone has stories of how their dogs choose the most inappropriate times to become clowns in the show ring. One time when I was showing two of my Danes, Donna and Lamb Chop, they were both a little antsy. They looked at me and I could see what they were thinking: “Let’s play with Greg!” They decided to do everything they could think of, the exact opposite of what I asked them to do or what they knew they should be doing. They would jump up on me and smother my face with kisses. They’d suddenly plop down when the judge wanted to evaluate their movement or take a look at their teeth. They were so wild that I couldn’t gait them across the ring -- this after weeks of good behavior. The judge didn’t dismiss me, but he could have. This will happen from time to time, and you can’t let it get to you.

By nature I’m a competitive person, but I have always been able to keep my attitude toward showing in perspective because it’s not just me involved -- it’s my dogs, too. I don’t want to put them through the kind of stress I went through when I was competing as a diver. Basically, some dogs like showing and some dogs don’t.

Dog lovers are lucky to be living in this day and age. Owners have always grieved for the loss of their dogs, but it used to be something they had to keep a secret. You don’t have to do that anymore. We are evolving and learning that it’s okay to grieve for a dog -- and that we shouldn’t minimize the grief of people who lose their pets. There are books and support groups available for people who are dealing with the loss of their pets. There are counselors who specialize in pet loss

and even cards you can send to people whose pets have died. There are plenty of people who openly discuss their grief about losing a pet (including me). Just look on the Internet sometime. You'll find pages and pages of tributes to dogs who have passed on -- and lots of opportunities to talk about your own dogs. I have even done this on my own web site, including a letter to my Donna about how much I miss her and how much she meant to me.

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