

Maddie's Story by Lisa Seretto

My dear Maddie died just over two years ago. She was my third Berner and my first rescue. Her story is an example that rescue dogs come with baggage and Maddie had a cart full.



I met Maddie a few weeks after she came into the program. Then Rescue Chair, Paul Emerson and his wife Mary Durham were fostering her. Paul had told me a bit of her story on the phone. I went to meet her out of curiosity. I still had my Nellie, then 10 ½ years old and was not looking to add an adult dog to our lives.

Well, we kept the girls on leash to meet and Maddie was lunging and barking ferociously at Nellie, teeth bared. Nellie gave her a withering look as if to say, "Get over yourself, girl." Maddie calmed down and we let the two of them sniff and walk around. I laughed and told Paul, "Good luck

placing her. She's not a Berner, she's a pit bull in disguise!"

More about Maddie's history. She came into Rescue at 4 ½ years old. She had been in at least three homes. The original owner never contacted the breeder when relocation meant that Maddie had to find a new home. The people who turned her over to Rescue had obtained her as a companion for the woman's mother who was living with them. This woman, Lorna, whom I later met, loved Maddie dearly. Sadly, Lorna had been diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. Her daughter and son-in-law were relocating and Lorna was moving to assisted living. Problems arose when Maddie no longer received the attention she was used to. There was already some tension between her and the man of the house. She was evaluated by Dr. Myrna Milani, a veterinary behaviorist and author (If you haven't read any of her books, get them). In a nut shell, Dr. Milani described Maddie as dominant, bossy, unsocialized with people and other dogs, and totally lacking any concept of human leadership. She recommended local trainers. The family was not willing to put the time and effort into her rehabilitation and so she went to Rescue. There were also reports of growling, owner-directed aggression toward the man, and a couple of bites.

Over the few months after my initial contact with Maddie I saw her several times when visiting Paul and Mary. Paul took her to an obedience class and was taking her to work to socialize her. I could tell she was a sweetie under the bluff. Paul would mention that she needed an owner who knew how to deal with a dominant dog and who wouldn't be put off by some growling (hint, hint). I was steadfast. Nellie was elderly and arthritic. She had been the queen since I got her. Physically she could not enforce her throne against a younger bitch who wanted to be top dog. Plus Maddie would take

as much time as a pup and I wanted to lavish Nellie with attention and spoil her till the end of our time together.

Sadly our farewell came sooner than expected with a diagnosis of metastasized bone cancer at the end of the summer. Six weeks later I found myself grief stricken and mourning the loss of my second Berner in less than a year and a half. "Uncle" Paul had been at my side when Nellie crossed the bridge and told me if I needed a dog to hug to give him a call. I dreaded returning to an empty house each day knowing there would be no welcoming woofs and wagging tail. That weekend I called Paul and Mary and asked if Maddie could keep me company overnight.

I wasn't ready for another dog yet but I felt I could give Maddie some one on one attention. I took her for a walk in a state park that afternoon. I kept mental notes on her behavior toward unfamiliar dogs and people. She was a bit uncertain about staying at my place overnight at first, sitting by my door at 9PM as if to say, "Thanks for the walk and dinner, but I'm ready to go home."

For the next few weekends I picked Maddie up for an afternoon walk. I knew in my heart that I needed a dog and that she certainly needed a home. But I wanted to know what her issues were and if I was equipped to give her what she needed. My dogs were included in every aspect of my life and I had trained them since puppy hood. Maddie was approaching 5 years old. I decided that I could honor Nellie and Jasper's memories by using what they taught me to give Maddie a new home.



Maddie settled in quickly since we had been spending time together for a few weeks. Socialization started right away with walks in town. At home we worked on attention. She loved clicker training! Once she responded to "Watch me" consistently we started walking on a local bike path. I had to be on the alert for approaching men. As soon as I saw someone I stopped and said "Watch me!" Maddie sat and looked at me. Click and treat as the man walked closer. If she looked away, I said "Leave it." No correction, I wanted her to associate good things with strangers. Click and treat as soon as she looked back. Within a couple of weeks Maddie automatically sat and looked up at me whenever someone approached. She was a quick learner.

At home we also worked on basic obedience. She tested me after about 3 weeks. I told her "down" as I was about to eat dinner. She hesitated then went to the back door and hit it with her paw, her signal to go out. I started to get up then realized that she didn't have to potty, she just didn't want to "down." I led her back and repeated "down" with my hand in her collar. She thought about it and then lay down. I then explained that the number one rule in my house was that she would do what I told her

100% of the time. I knew that here was a girl who would quickly take advantage of any inconsistency. The bossy bitch had met her match!

I always enjoyed walking in the woods with my dogs off leash. Maddie would have to earn that freedom and I would have to be extremely vigilant. I thought about what her problems would be: rushing people and or dogs, barking and growling at people she perceived to be a possible threat, and generally exhibiting bad manners. Then I made a list of commands to teach her that would interrupt the chain of behaviors. First she needed a "caution" word. I chose "stop." I taught her on a long line in an area with no distractions. I allowed her to get out about 20 feet ahead and then said "stop!" When she turned to look at me I clicked. That meant treats! As soon as she moved toward me I called "come" in a happy voice and started running backward. Lots of treats and praise when she reached me. As she became reliable I added distractions and eventually let Maddie off leash in a safe, dog friendly area. When Maddie spotted a man headed toward us she was like a heat-seeking missile. I had to constantly scan the area and anticipate anything that might push her launch button. In addition to the commands I had taught her I called her back to me at random times during our walks and gave her treats. She never ranged out of sight and learned to check in with me for goodies.

Maddie did reasonably well with other dogs. She earned the title "Fun police" because she didn't tolerate nonsense from younger, rowdy dogs. She did make friends with a female pit bull and they adored playing tug with each other. Maddie also became more relaxed around unfamiliar people. She wanted to make the first move and after a sniff, she would do a Berner lean against their legs and nudge for a cookie.

Maddie and I also went to obedience classes together. She had a lot of drive and enjoyed training. Our first summer together we went to carting class at Alison Jaskiewicz's house. And that October 2, 1999, scarcely 10 months after she came to live with me, Maddie earned her Novice Draft Dog title. I was so proud of her!

Another rewarding experience was going to visit Lorna at her assisted living residence. I had sent her a card after I adopted Maddie to let her know how Maddie was doing. About six months later she invited us to have lunch with her. Lorna was so happy to see Maddie. And she was amazed to watch Miss Maddie walk right up to unfamiliar men, sit on their feet, and nudge their hands for pats.

Maddie was a tough girl who had endured many changes in her first four years. With lots of time, love, and patience she became the sweetheart she was always meant to be. Our bond was as strong as if we had been together since she was a pup. Maybe stronger.

I lost my Maddie less than four years after we found each other. She'll be in my heart forever.