

Ol' Abbey, and millions of pets like her, are always there for us

By Rick Maier

“But Dad, she’s part Cocker Spaniel, which is just like a Retriever,” the kids pleaded, calling from the pet shop. “She won’t shed. Can we get her, please, can we? Every kid needs a dog!”

How could I say no? I caved, despite major reservations about buying a Cockerpoo from the Mall.

“Okay, okay, but you have to help take care of her.” Yeah, right.

I really wanted another Golden Retriever or Black Lab, but a Cocker Spaniel might be easier to manage.

The months passed, but the dog didn’t grow much. The “poo” part was clearly dominating the “Cocker” part. Soon my worst fears were confirmed - Abbey was indeed a girly dog.

Her hair became matted, so we took her to a grooming salon where I got lectured for not brushing the dog’s hair every day. Yeah, right. Abbey returned with one of those poodle cuts - you know, shaved in some spots, poofed in others. How embarrassing.

The French-looking dog began shamelessly begging for attention – dancing across the room on her hind legs, then laying on her back kicking her front feet. She loves to be held and yelps as if she’s been mortally wounded if you leave her. The dog is so unmanly that she can’t possibly be considered in the same species as a Lab. And of course, the more I ignore the dog, the more she won’t leave me alone.

Just like Travis when Old Yeller showed up on the farm, Ol’ Abbey and I did not get along well at first. Then I began to realize how smart the pooch was. She saved the yard by chasing geese away. A neighbor watched Abbey bark at a would-be burglar until he turned around in search of an easier target.

It’s just a matter of time before she saves the kids from a rattlesnake or wakes us up to escape a fire late some night.

She never leaves my sight, jumping up excitedly at any move that might include her. She plays with the kids tirelessly, guards the house proudly and dangles tenaciously by her teeth if you try to take her rope bone.

After four years, Ol' Abbey and I are bonding. Her devotion is unconditional – she doesn't care how I look or if I'm in a bad mood. She never argues or holds a grudge or lets her pride get in the way. I can feel my pulse slow and stress wash away when I pet her.

I no longer hope she jumps out the car window or runs away, which is about as close to expressing affection as a macho guy can say about a girly dog.

You may be braced for a sad ending to this story, my having mentioned Old Yeller and Travis, but everything is just fine. I figure that Ol' Abbey and I will be together long after the kids leave for college, the two of us aging gracefully together.

I was thinking of treating Abbey to a big ham bone for the holidays. But if she could talk I think she'd say, don't go to any trouble getting me a bone, just remember to rub my belly for a couple moments each day.

This season of thanksgiving is a terrific time to remember the people - and pets - that mean so much to us. Life changes too quickly to take the things we love for granted.

Rick Maier is Treasurer at Wesleyan College. Reply at www.rickmaier.com.