

Cold Water Tail

by Diane O. Gifford

It was early in the training season and the pond seemed to have warmed enough for a water session. After working on a water blind handling pattern, the two year old black Labrador Retriever bitch was towed and returned to her kennel in the car without any unusual occurrences. The next morning her owner noted that her tail was not carried in its normal manner-two thirds hung limply. Upon examination of her hindquarters, the Labrador appeared in obvious distress and even yelped and whimpered when asked to sit. Fearing a "broken tail" or some other injury, a veterinarian was consulted and x-rays were taken. However, no firm diagnosis was determined. Four days later, without treatment, the bitch's tail carriage returned to normal.

"Cold water tail," "limber tail syndrome," "broken tail," "dead tail," "broken wag" are all euphemisms for a relatively common occurrence in sporting dogs. This episode appears to be a painful, but relatively benign affliction that can occur after swimming, after a heavy hunting day or after a bath with cold water or water that is too warm. It is not always associated with a swim or water, but can occur after a heavy day of work that may involve a lot of tail action. The majority of cases reported have been in sporting dogs or hounds such as Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, Setters, Pointers, Flatcoats, Foxhounds and Beagles. However, one source has cited a case in a Belgian Shepherd. Almost all dogs that suffer through an occurrence return to normal within a few days. Affected dogs may or may not have a repeat incidence during their lifetime. It has been described by the layman as a "sprain," fibrosis or a "cold in the tail." However, the affected dog is miserable at the onset and the tail is painful. The dog cannot raise its tail. It will be held horizontally for a few inches and then droops vertically.

Males as well as females are affected as the following narrative from Ron Mandsager D.V.M., Nordic Pine Labradors, Stillwater, Oklahoma indicates: "My male Lab has experienced the condition on two occasions - both were a day or two after several days of heavy hunting (pheasant). On the first occasion, I was very concerned - the tail was carried limply and my dog was in obvious discomfort. Not knowing what was going on (this condition was never mentioned in Vet School, folks!) I was concerned about the possibility of either a fracture or nerve injury in the tail. We radiographed the caudal pelvic area, and the only thing we may have detected was swelling of the ventral muscles at the base of the tail. It resolved spontaneously after a day or two. After the second occurrence, and thinking a bit about what had transpired prior to the condition developing, my hunch is that in my dog it is a response to strenuous exercise of the tail muscles-more than they are used to. When my dog hunts pheasants and gets "birdy," the tail is up and beating rapidly. Between bouts of heavy activity, my dog is crated overnight and as we travel - this may aggravate the condition. This is just a hunch - no evidence. As a veterinarian, I had never seen or heard of this condition, nor had several colleagues with whom I discussed the condition with when I first encountered it."

Research of veterinary references indicates that no scientific studies presently exist explaining this syndrome. However, Janet E. Steiss, DVM, PhD, and J.C. Wright, DVM, PhD at Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine, as part of a project aimed at determining the cause or causes of this condition are conducting mail and telephone surveys. Their initial inquiries were sent to 418 owners and trainers of hunting dogs in the Southeastern United States. Twenty-seven per cent replied - 90% had owned or trained hunting dogs for more than 10 years and respondents had a total of 3,066 dogs in their kennels. Seventy-six per cent of the dogs were used for hunting. Half were in the field once a week and the other half more than once a week. The five breeds commonly observed to have been affected with the syndrome were the English Pointer, the English Setter, the Foxhound, the Beagle and the Labrador Retriever.

To date researchers at Auburn University do not have any concrete evidence regarding the cause of limber tail syndrome, but there are some indications that there are elevations in the muscle enzymes of affected dogs. They would like to obtain more information for their study. Dr. Steiss sent the following notice for the Yearbook:

"Researchers in the Sports Medicine Program at the College of Veterinary Medicine, Auburn University, are conducting a study on limber tail syndrome in hunting dogs. This condition has been observed in breeds such as English Pointers, English Setters, and Labrador Retrievers. The etiology is unknown at this time, but the condition often seems to occur after a hard workout the previous day, exposure to cold/wet weather, or prolonged cage transport. Typically, dogs lose control of their tail to the extent that they have a lower than normal tail set. Careful palpation may elicit pain near the base of the tail. Recovery usually occurs within a few days.

In order to obtain more information on possible causes, prevention and/or treatment, the veterinarians at Auburn University are looking for owners and veterinarians who would be willing to cooperate in one of the following ways when they have a dog that is acutely affected with limber tail syndrome: (1) Analysis of a single blood sample from affected dogs within 24-48 hours after onset for biochemistry (blood tests could be run at the referring veterinarian's laboratory, without having to ship blood samples); or, (2) Allow non-invasive examinations of affected dogs at Auburn University. The examinations would include electromyography, ultrasonography, thermography, and magnetic resonance imaging, under general anesthesia. Dogs would be returned to the owner/trainer within 2-3 days; or, (3) Donate dogs that are acutely affected with limber tail."

The contact for those who can help is:

Jan E. Steiss, DVM, PhD.
Scott-Ritchey Research Center, Auburn University
College of Veterinary Medicine
Alabama 36849-5525
(334) 844-5951

References:

- Grayson, Peggy, *Water and the dead tail syndrome*, Dog World, May 5, 1995
Grayson, Peggy, *What causes dead tails?*, Dog World, April 14, 1995
Roslin-Williams, M., *All About the Labrador Retriever*, Pelham Books, England, 1980
Sawtelle, Lucille, *All About the Golden Retriever*, Pelham Books, England, 1980
Steiss, Janet E. & Wright, J.C., *Limber Tail Syndrome in Hunting Dogs*, Sports Medicine Program Newsletter, Auburn University College of Veterinary Medicine, Winter 1995

Copyright © 1995, The Labrador Retriever Club, Inc., 6146 Mines Road, Livermore, CA 94550, all rights reserved. This article first appeared in the Labrador Retriever Club, Inc. 1995 Yearbook; it is reprinted with permission of the editor.

Contributed to The Retriever News.com by Ron Mandsager, DVM