

English springer spaniel stray beats cleft palate

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This story begins with a stray that seemed likely to "fall through the cracks." In January 2010, a Good Samaritan found a young dog wandering in rural San Diego County and delivered him to a local animal shelter. One look at the dog's face told why he was abandoned. Lynn Narlesky, with UC Davis School of Veterinary Medicine Office, tells the story of a dog that beat all the odds.



The young English springer spaniel had a rare birth defect that combined a cleft palate with a nose that appeared to be divided into two pieces (a bifid nose). At the shelter a kennel cough outbreak was under way and the dog caught the highly contagious disease. Shelter personnel struggled to give him oral medications that navigated from the gap in his palate up into his nasal passages. As a result, a sinus infection set in.

Enter English Springer Rescue America and volunteer Bill Sterling, who visited often while shelter personnel continued their nursing. It wasn't long before Sterling dubbed him Tug because the dog tugged at his heartstrings. It was six weeks before Tug recovered.

But Tug would never recover from his birth defect; surgery was the only solution. Sterling reached out to Mary Turner, a rescue volunteer in Vacaville. She arranged for the dog to visit the William R. Pritchard Veterinary Medical Teaching Hospital in Davis, where several of her own springers had been treated. Frank Verstraete, a professor of veterinary dentistry and oral surgery, evaluated Tug's condition.

"The nose problem is quite rare," he said. "We hadn't seen it except in some South American breeds. However, the cleft palate made it a medical problem, so we decided to operate."

In April, Verstraete and Dr. Boaz Arzi performed a procedure, one of the first of its kind, to correct the cleft in Tug's palate and repair his nose. The method, adapted from human facial surgery, took more than four hours.

Tug came through with flying colors, and remained with Turner during his recuperation. She was fond of her young charge, but had no intention of adopting him. He was too energetic, she observed, even while wearing the "cone of shame." Plus, Tug hadn't been around many other dogs because of the need to protect his healing face and would require socialization with a trainer. Despite all, Tug's prospects for a home still appeared dim.

But his story remained inspiring. Tug could have become a sorry statistic. Instead, shepherded from street to shelter to foster home to veterinary hospital by a series of caring individuals, Tug can now breathe, chew and swallow normally. In October, he was officially given a clean bill of health.

True to his name, Tug kept tugging heartstrings, which explains why Turner changed her mind. She fell in love with her young foster, and the stray that beat the odds found his forever home.

To learn about English springer spaniel rescue, go to www.springerrescue.org. To learn more about UC Davis veterinary medicine, go to www.vetmed.ucdavis.edu.

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