

My first big mistake was picking out the liveliest pup in the litter. My second was choosing a border collie instead of, say, a nice, easy-going golden retriever. Anyone who has ever owned one will tell you that border collies are high-strung animals that require a great deal of exercise. It's also been said that they are the smartest of all breeds, but I have no way of confirming that. What I do know is that they are a willful lot, and in their own minds convinced that they are, without a doubt, top dogs.

Not so very long ago border collies were wolves—and believe me, they haven't evolved all that much. What they did was strike a deal with the beleaguered herdsman: “Feed me, and I'll stop eating your sheep. In fact, I'll even tend the flock for you, which for me isn't hard because I can strike terror into their ovine hearts just by crouching low and glowering.”

We got the dog from my brother-in-law, who is a rancher and who assured me that Tippy could sleep outside, same as a farm dog does. So I built him a dog house, a nice one with a shingled roof, porch and insulated walls. Alas, it didn't have cable TV or central heating or running water or any of the creature comforts that we humans enjoy. Tippy didn't see it the rancher's way. “Why should I sleep outside?” he wondered. And I, being the spineless fool that I am, caved in. That was my third mistake.

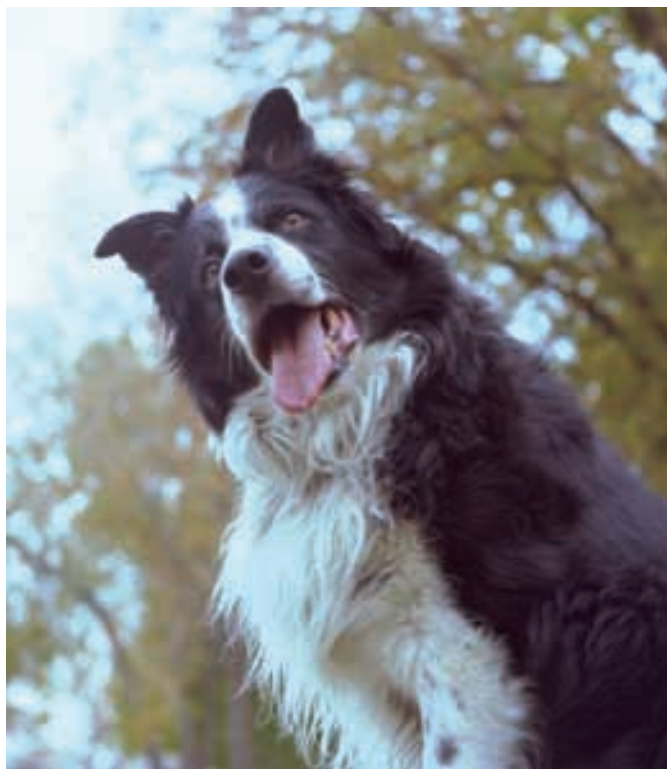
Before we knew what was happening, Tippy had become a regular member of the family. Think of Pecos Bill, who was adopted by a pack of wolves—except the other way around. Tippy was a wolf that had been adopted by a family of humans. He learned our ways even as we, sheepishly, learned to accommodate his. In time he became not a pet, but a lifestyle.

At least once a day I would take him for a walk, and by walk I mean a long, long hike. Along the way I discovered a lot of places I would never have discovered otherwise. I became intimately familiar with Bonneville Glen and Laird Park, which is where we became acquainted with a personable American Eskimo dog named Homer, the de facto park host. Soon we were joined by Scout and his friend Abbie, and then a boxer named Baylen. Those dogs, like mine, all had “masters,” and in short order the four of us so-

TIPPY THE TOP DOG

What was I thinking?

Words and photos by Richard Menzies.



called masters became friends. I mean, when your dog is avidly sniffing the butt of some other person's dog, it kinda breaks the ice.

By and by, Scout's and Abbie's owners moved away. Homer was run over by a car and Baylen also died. Nicole, Baylen's bereaved owner, stopped coming to the park, so I moved on to Wasatch Hollow, where Tippy and I made some new friends, including a German shepherd named Silver. Between Laird and the Hollow, Tippy picked up the kindly Mr. Hess and Christina, two non-dog owners who nonetheless stocked dog biscuits in case Tippy should come call-

ing, which of course he did. We also became acquainted with a widower named Jim and his beloved dog Julie. One day Julie got sick and had to be put down. Jim confided that he would have preferred to take the lethal injection himself. Not long afterward, I saw Jim's picture in the obituary pages.

One day Tippy discovered that not all automobile trips lead to the veterinarian and, after that, his territory was vastly expanded. Thus he discovered Tanner Park and a whole new bunch of canines, some of which not only smelled good but also tasted good! As a result, he and I were banished to the “bad dog” section of the park, which is where we met Carl and his very bad dog Kyla. Kyla and Tippy immediately hit it off. They took turns peeing on every bush around until finally word came down that even bad dogs were no longer welcome in the bad-dog section of Tanner Park.

We tried meeting at various places around town, but there was always a problem. Neither Kyla nor Tippy are familiar with the concept of public space. In Australia (where Kyla the dingo comes from), if you pee on something, it's yours. In Scotland's border country (where Tippy's ilk hails from), it's almost always raining—so you can pee to your heart's delight because nobody can ever be sure which are rain puddles and which are pee puddles.

Now, some dogs like to play fetch, but not Tippy. Border collies are infielders, not retrievers. So we two invented a game that I call boredom ball, in which I bounce a tennis ball off a tree trunk and Tippy snags it. But if it goes long, he will *not* retrieve it. That's my job. And even when he does catch it, he doesn't bring it back. No, he always drops it about 10 feet short. If I should beg and plead with him to bring it closer, he'll reluctantly pick it up and drop it approximately one inch closer. This game will continue until finally I break down and fetch the ball myself, proving once again just who is in charge.

There are some dogs you can just never dominate. Instead, what you do is form a partnership, same as the Scottish sheepherder did with his erstwhile predator. So it came to pass that Tippy and I became partners, and our partnership endured for almost 14 years.



Tippy was always in charge. ABOVE: This is boredom ball, where Tippy waits for the easy part. BELOW: Tippy gets comfortable in the garden. OPPOSITE: Come on Menzies, I'm ready to roll.

The past few months have been the hardest. Half blind and barely able to stand, he nonetheless made a game effort to go for a daily walk, even though our walks had become very short, just far enough so that he

could sniff around a bit and check his pe-mails. Then yesterday morning he couldn't get to his feet, so Anne and I were forced to make a tough decision.

I was hoping Tippy and I would make it

through the winter, and we almost did. And now at last I think I see a welcome ray of sunshine breaking through the cloud cover. If it ever warms up, I plan to go for a long, long walk through the dog-forsaken streets and parkways of my neighborhood. This time around I won't be packing a leash, or a tennis ball, or a bunch of plastic bags. I'll walk briskly, ignoring the fire hydrants and the UPS trucks, the tasty Weimaraners and rascally mailmen. That cottonwood tree where Tippy and I used to play boredom ball for hours on end? I won't have to go there. All I need to do is close my eyes and I can see it quite clearly—at its base those familiar floppy ears, that expectant gaze, that crazy old dog of mine patiently waiting for me to go fetch his stupid tennis ball. ■

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