

# Substantial Disruption



## World's Best Dog

By Mike Tully

*The river flows  
It flows to the sea...*

In the monsoon season of 1987 two black puppies were tossed from a moving pickup truck onto La Madera Park in midtown Tucson. One of them, later named Ramon, suffered a broken leg. His brother, forecasting a durability that eventually characterized him, was unhurt. People who saw the abandonment rescued the puppies and took them to a Veterinarian named Jim Percell at Catalina Pet Hospital.

Jim knew that Kris and I were looking for a puppy for our little girl and called us. The next day we met the acquaintance of a spirited little pup, a black Lab mix, at the pet hospital. When the puppy jumped up on Meg, our daughter, who was not quite three, she bumped her head and cried. "Look," said Jim. "He becomes quiet when the baby cries." We took the pup home, a fistful of black fur and fun, and I ironically named him Spot. When people would learn his name they asked, "Where are his spots?" "He only has one," I always told them. "And it completely covers him." I drew on my personal sense of irony when I named him. Not surprisingly, he became my dog.

*Wherever that river goes  
That's where I want to be...*

Not much later a friend of ours from my Law School days, Jim Watts, stayed with us for a while. He brought along his dog, a chocolate Lab mix named Coco. Coco house-broke Spot for us. The usual "nose in the poop" lessons were unnecessary and probably a waste of time. I credited Coco for the training and didn't realize what a prodigy her pupil was.

When Spot was a few months old I decided to train him to fetch the newspaper. I pointed to it in the driveway, said, "Pick it up. Bring it here." I gestured and pantomimed and repeated the command a couple of times. Spot learned how to fetch the newspaper in five minutes. After that, all I had to do was tell Spot to fetch the paper and he would run out to the driveway, pick up the newspaper, and bring it to me, tail wagging like an antenna in a windstorm. I'm pretty good with dogs, but I'm not such a skilled trainer that I can teach a complicated process such as fetching the morning paper in a mere five minutes. The genius was obviously with the student, not the teacher.

He taught me more than I ever taught him. For example, he learned how to wake me up when I was asleep in bed. He would not bark at me, or even whimper, as most dogs would, nor would he jump up on the bed. Both of those would have been impolite. Instead, he would sit close to my

side of the bed and make sounds with his tongue until I woke up. It almost seemed as though as he was trying to form words. That's the way he would wake me up. Softly, quietly, and respectfully.

He even learned to grin. Many dogs grin because that's how their mouth is constructed, Irish Setters for example. Spot, however, when he smiled – and it was a genuine social smile – would turn up both sides of his mouth and expose his teeth in an obvious grin. I recall a time we encountered my late parents in a parking lot and parked next to them. Spot came to the window, saw "Grandma and Grandpa" and started grinning. They both laughed. It was endearing and Meg would tell him, "You're such a grinner."

*Flow river flow  
Let your waters wash down  
Take me from this road  
To some other town...*

Spot turned out to be a fetching savant. Every stick was meant to be tossed and retrieved. Most dogs have a problem with the "retrieve" part of the process. Not Spot. He loved to run after sticks, pick them up, and bring them back to me. Dogs tend to think of a tossed stick as a valuable thing to be coveted and kept, which is why the "retrieve" command challenges many dog owners. For Spot, however, the stick was not as valuable as the process. He would bring it back to me, every time, over and over, until I tired of the game. He never did.

When I took Spot hiking in the Catalinas, the roles were reversed. He began to teach me. I had this idiotic notion that hiking with a dog meant keeping the dog on a leash as we clambered up the trail. Spot set me straight by grabbing the nearest stick, bringing it to me, then sitting impatiently until I figured out that I was supposed to throw it for him. That, of course, meant letting him off the leash. It took me longer to figure that out than it took him to learn how to fetch the morning paper.

Once I figured out my proper role, the leash became an ornament that I carried with me in case a ranger wandered by. With Spot, a leash was unnecessary. All I needed was a stick. Our favorite trail was Upper Pontatoc Canyon, which was near our house. At the beginning of our hikes, Spot would pick out a stick and bring it to me. My role was to repeatedly throw the stick ahead of us on the trail and Spot would dash after it, return with it, drop it at my feet, and then wait expectantly for me to toss it again. That is how we made it to the waterfall area in Pontatoc Canyon. I would toss the stick, Spot would fetch and retrieve, I would toss again, and we would eventually reach our destination, invariably a pool chosen by Spot. As I would huff and puff my way up the three and a half mile trail, Spot would cover three times that distance at full speed, fetching and retrieving, then repeating the process. He was the greatest athlete I have ever known.

*All he wanted  
Was to be free  
And that's the way  
It turned out to be...*

One afternoon, Jim, Coco, Spot and I were sitting at the top of a dry waterfall in upper Pontatoc Canyon. Spot ventured too close to the edge, where the rocks are slippery, scoured and dangerous. His traction gradually began to give way to gravity, and I watched with horror as he slipped closer to the edge, and then went over. I briefly considered reaching out to grab him, but knew that I would not be able to keep my grip. He soared into space, fell several yards, landed hard on a rock, bounced farther downhill, landing on ledge after ledge until he smacked onto a flat granite surface more than a hundred feet down the hill. He was still and I thought he had been killed, because he had fallen so far so fast. I was still holding my breath when Spot suddenly sprang to life, realized that he was trapped far away from us, and began barking for help. Jim and I were amazed that he had survived the fall. Spot was about a year old at the time. We had to walk more than a mile downstream, then back upstream to get to where he had landed.

He was bruised, frightened, and probably in shock. At least that's what I thought until we finally made it back to the trail. Then he grabbed a stick and wanted to play fetch. That's when I realized that I not only had one of the smartest dogs in the world, but one of the toughest. A dog I thought had certainly been killed in a fall was running and fetching as though all he had done was step off a flagstone. He didn't even limp.

*Flow river flow*

*Let your waters wash down*

*Take me from this road*

*To some other town...*

Spot and I hiked the Upper Pontatoc Canyon trail dozens of times, possibly hundreds. His favorite season was spring, when the stream was flowing and there was water in the drainage. A little over three miles into Pontatoc the trail crests and drops into a basin where there are pools and waterfalls. Spot would disappear shortly before the crest. When I finally made it to the top, I would look down into the basin, and there was Spot, splashing happily in the pools, wagging his tail, and barking a "what's taking you so long?" bark.

Spot loved the pools in the Catalinas. Unfortunately, he also loved the community pool and inspired the first "no dogs" rule in our subdivision. No other dog ever had the audacity to jump in the Skyline Bel Aire community center pool, but Spot was "no other dog." He was, however, banned from the pool area.

But that did not stop us from going to the recreation area, which includes a basketball half court. I had gotten used to shooting baskets there, usually by myself (although there were occasional pickup games) and started bringing Spot with me. The dog was a hellacious defender. I would try to drive to the basket for a lay up and he would invariably steal the ball from me, knocking it away and going after it, even though he could not pick it up. I would get irritated and he would love it.

I finally decided to start tossing tennis balls for him to fetch while I shot baskets. There is a tennis court near the basketball half court, and there were always tennis balls scattered throughout the desert area around and near the courts. Spot and I developed a game of "shoot the basketball, toss the tennis ball." I learned to shoot baskets in between fetches. (Note who was

doing the teaching.) When Spot got overheated, we would walk up the steps to the drinking fountain. Spot would place his paws on the fountain, I would turn it on, and he would slurp away. I swear that he knew what a drinking fountain was for before I showed him. I didn't teach him how to drink out of a drinking fountain. He taught me to turn it on for him when he wanted a drink. When he got thirsty, he would head for the drinking fountain and wait for me to activate it for him.

Once, on a hot summer day when Spot, Meg and I were playing on the basketball court, Spot got overheated and collapsed. We brought him some water from the fountain, did what we could to cool him off, and then rushed him home, fearing heatstroke. An hour later he was fetching again, reinforcing his growing reputation of invincibility.

*Flow river flow  
Past the shaded tree...*

The tennis balls gradually became known as "slime balls," because of the viscous layer of saliva they would develop after repeated fetches. Talented as Spot was with sticks, his prowess with tennis balls became legendary among friends and acquaintances. He learned to catch tennis balls on the fly. It didn't matter how fast I threw them. He would catch them with a "pock" sound, like a baseball hitting a catcher's mitt. He would catch them over and over, twenty times in a row, thirty, forty. As long as I tossed the tennis ball within his lunging distance, he would catch it. Whether it required jumping five feet in the air, or dashing laterally, he would make the catch.

Spot became such a master of catching "slime balls" that I began to increase the difficulty factor. We had a cabin in Summerhaven that had a power line in front that crossed the street. I tried tossing the tennis ball over the power line, which was about thirty feet above the street. Spot would catch it, not once, not twice, but dozens of times. As long as I didn't screw up with an errant toss, he would make the catch.

Then, I attempted something outrageous: I decided to see if Spot could catch a ball that I tossed over our house. I stationed Spot in the front yard, in the driveway. Then, I walked around to the back of the house and threw the tennis ball over the house. He had to pick it up in mid-air as it arced over the house and catch it. He did so, several times in succession, unless I threw the ball into a cactus patch or left it on the roof. If the ball was within catching range, he would catch it. I still don't know how he did it.

Spot and I would perform fetching demonstrations at Meg's elementary school. He could have put "Air Bud" to shame. I would toss him ten tennis balls in rapid succession and he would catch each one, quickly adjusting to the next toss. As I said, he was a phenomenal athlete.

*Go river, go  
Go to the sea  
Flow to the sea...*

Spot loved Christmas. He loved the tree, the lights, the company, and most of all the presents. When he saw us unwrapping Christmas packages, he decided that was something he wanted to

do. Spot inspired a new Christmas tradition: the dog opening Christmas presents. That was something he taught us. We didn't teach him. He would pull at the ribbons and tear off the wrapping paper. Like most families, we would appoint the youngest member of the family to open the presents. We thought that meant Meg would do the honors. However, Spot had his own agenda. He was, in fact, the youngest member of the family. Meg deferred to him, because he obviously enjoyed the process so much. My late parents and Kris' parents, when they visited from California, were amazed at the present-unwrapping dog. Spot insisted on unwrapping every present. For him, it was a joyous occasion.

We probably inspired that behavior by giving Spot a tube of fresh, new tennis balls every Christmas. The first time we did that I invited Spot to open his own present, not really believing that he would figure out what presents were for. He opened his own present, the tube of tennis balls, and decided that he liked to open presents. He became our Christmas dog and continued to be the "designated unwrapper" until age and infirmity slowed him down.

How smart was Spot? Kris and I knew that he understood a lot of words and decided to figure out many words he understood. We confirmed at least sixty, and that was probably a low estimate.

I recall an amusing incident when Jim tried to get Coco to jump into a car by shouting the term, "Kennel." "Coco, Kennel!" he would repeat, as Coco tried to figure out what he meant by that. When it was Spot's turn, I said, "Spot, get in the car." That's how I communicated with Spot. He was always a step ahead. No fancy commands for him. Plain English was enough. One day, a contractor met with Kris and me at the house. As the three of us walked out the front door, Spot walked with us. "Spot, you wait here," I said, and he stopped abruptly at the threshold. "Wow," said the contractor. "Really well trained!" I laughed at that remark. I never felt like I had to "train" Spot to do anything.

Here is how smart Spot was: One evening I tried an experiment. I wrote a note to Meg, rolled it up and tucked it into Spot's collar, and said, "Take it to Meg." The note instructed her to answer it and send it back to me. Spot went immediately to Meg's room; she read the note, answered it in writing, then tucked it back into Spot's collar and sent him back to Kris and me in the living room. He returned with the answered note. There was no training involved. Spot somehow knew what to do. I have known humans less trainable than that. This is a true story. Everything in this piece is absolutely true.

*The river flows  
It flows to the sea...*

Time gradually caught up with Spot, as it does with us all. He developed arthritis and his running, jumping, and fetching days gradually waned. Of course, I was aging, too. I met Spot when I was a young man of 38. He and I aged together. Meg entered elementary school, then high school, finally college. She moved out and had a dog of her own, the precious and responsible Roxy. Kris and I adopted "Augie," a large mongrel primarily composed of Lab and Pit Bull Terrier. He became a good companion for Spot.

But, Spot was my dog and my constant companion. We continued to hike the Catalinas together until the federal government decided that dogs should be banned from the Catalinas in order to preserve a fictitious herd of mountain sheep. Spot and I were actually kicked out of Finger Rock Canyon by a ranger who backed off when he realized the "no dogs" sign had been knocked down. He wanted to cite us anyway. Neither Spot nor I found him impressive and he let us go.

But, the times, they had a'changed. Dogs were no longer allowed in the Catalinas. I had matured from a thirty something to a fifty something. Spot became a dog-year nonagenarian. Age slowed us and the law banned us and we spent most of our time around the house. I have worked out of a home office for the last couple of years. There is a window in my office with a western view. I would place Spot's red cushion just below the window. He would spend his days in my company, always nearby, always faithful, always supportive. I would have long talks with him. As Neil Young wrote, "I told the dog about everything." As I entered middle age, he wandered off into old age. David Letterman once observed that the best task for science would be to find a way to extend a dog's life to 85 years, so that we can spend our lives with one dog. How I wish I could have extended Spot's life.

*Wherever that river goes  
That's where I want to be  
Flow river flow...*

Spot lived eighteen years, a near-centenarian in dog years. He stubbornly refused to die, despite the onset of severe arthritis and neurological problems. His weight dropped into the low thirties and his rib cage became visible. His vision and hearing began to fail and he fell more and more often. At first, he resented it and growled at me when I lifted him up after a fall. He was always a proud animal. Then he came to accept it.

In the spring of 2004, Spot had his last great adventure. A crew of window-washers carelessly left open the gate to our back yard. Spot wandered off and we realized around midnight that he was gone. This was on a Saturday and I had to be on the air for the "Inside Track" radio program the next day. I looked for him until 2AM, at which time I had to get some sleep. The next morning, while I was on the air, Kris posted notices around our neighborhood. We did not expect to find him alive.

When I returned home from the radio show a 12 year old neighbor boy, who had seen the notices, called us and said, "We found your dog." With his help, we located Spot in a foothills wash about a mile from our house. He had wandered that far during the night, even though he was nearly deaf, blind, and arthritic. The sandy bed of the wash I found him in was pocked with various animal tracks, including javelina, coyote, and bobcat. He was thirsty and weak. I picked him up and carried him through the wash to a nearby street, where Kris was waiting with our van. Just before that street, there was a curve in the wash. At that point, I set Spot down, and let him walk out on his own. He was too proud to be carried out and wanted to walk out on his own terms. He had trained me well enough to understand and comply with his wishes.

I still don't understand how he survived the night. Of course, I'm not sure I understand how he escaped injury when he was tossed onto La Madera Park, when he tumbled a hundred feet down

a dry waterfall, or when he collapsed with heat stroke at the rec center, except to observe that he was a remarkably tough son of a bitch.

*Let your waters wash down  
Take me from this road  
To some other town...*

Last night Spot only slept for three hours, between 1AM and 4AM. I stayed up with him for the balance of the night, gently stroking his neck and ears. Kris had stayed up with him earlier this week. He was whimpering, groaning, shivering, and suffering. Still, he exuded life-affirming stubbornness. He still had an appetite, a good sense of smell, and enjoyed our company. He seemed like he wanted to keep going.

But the battle was gradually being lost. He was falling more often. He developed an infection that diminished his bladder control. He fell dozens of times every day, sometimes in his own waste. Kris and I were always picking him up and cleaning him off. His disdain for being picked up – he was a proud animal, as I stated – became resolution to the inevitable. He was losing the ability to walk.

Worst of all, he was suffering. He would whimper, hyperventilate, groan, and cry out in pain. We would sit with him for hours, stroking his neck and ears, telling him how much we loved him, and praying that his suffering would somehow abate. I met with Dr. Buzz Cohen, a compassionate and wonderful man who succeeded Jim Percell at Catalina Pet Hospital, and tried a different mix of medication and treatment.

Last night, as I stroked my fine old warrior's ears, rubbed his exposed ribs, and massaged his emaciated and ravaged shoulders, I knew the end was near. All the new medication we tried failed to work the miracle Buzz, Kris and I had prayed for. We could not arrest the suffering of this wonderful old champion. I looked into his eyes and he pleaded for relief.

He was finally at peace at noon, June 25, 2005.

*The river flows  
It flows to the sea  
Wherever that river goes  
That's where I want to be...*

We will retrieve Spot's ashes in a few days. I want to carry some of them as high into the desert canyons of the Catalinas as I can climb and scatter them where Spot and I climbed to a place where we would look over Pontatoc Ridge onto the valley, where Spot grabbed an eight-foot long branch and tried to bring it back to the city. I still have the photograph, Spot and his audacious branch in the foreground, the valley floor and the city in the background. I will keep some ashes for myself.

But that will not be his legacy, at least not for me. Spot's legacy will not be limited to the events, achievements, and episodes I've recited here. Instead, it will be in the moments when I hear the

distant sound of dog tags tinkling, the sound of his claws ticking on the hardwood floor, the brief, fleeting shadow of a spirited black form that is just outside my vision. It will be in my dreams, hopefully in a place where Spot still runs circles around me in the mountains, where he splashes in the pools filled by runoff and snowmelt, and leads me farther than I think I can go simply because I need to toss a stick for him to retrieve. It will be in the corners of my vision, at the edge of sunset, where I feel him watching me, waiting for that toss, that command, the unspoken language we shared so intimately. It will be in every Christmas when I have to open my own presents. It will be in every summer I go hiking without him, and every day when I reach down to pet him and he is not there.

When my time comes I pray the Boatman will be accompanied by a dog with a rolled-up note in his collar.

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(Lyrics to "Ballad of Easy Rider" by Roger McGuinn.)