

Need New Knees?

Part One

Author's Note: It is important to remember that this story represents my personal experience with a Total Knee Replacement (TKR). Each person is different and will have different concerns and factors that effect the decision to have a TKR. Please do plenty of research. Talk to more than one surgeon, and even to nurses and physical therapists that have experience with TKRs.

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I'm uncertain who actually said "no pain, no gain" but I grew up with Vince Lombardi, and the following quote comes close enough: "If you can accept losing you can't win. If you can walk you can run. No one is ever hurt. Hurt is in your mind." This mantra was drilled into my head as a kid growing up in Chicago and playing sports in high school and college. I had many sports-related injuries during this period and my knees seemed to suffer the most. But when you're young who thinks about how you are going to feel in your 40s and 50s?

I have always shared my life with dogs. When I became involved in running, my dogs were my jogging partners. For years I ran 4-6 miles daily with my dogs. Running takes a toll and I eventually shifted my activities from road racing and marathons to triathlons and then competitive cycling. At some point I realized my running career was over. Actually my second arthroscopic surgery on my knees hit me over the head with that knowledge and ended one of my favorite activities, running with my dogs.

Since I could not run and my dog was getting older, walking suited us fine. But then a wild energetic Standard Poodle came into my life. Woola needed a lot of exercise, which I tried to provide. We walked and I threw the ball, but I couldn't take her out for a good run. Then five years ago, I ran into somebody doing training with some jumps in a local park. He told me he competed with his dogs in this sport called agility. I asked him if I could see if Woola could go over one of his jumps; she did and I was hooked.

Jumping in with Both Knees

Our agility adventure started. I threw myself into the sport. I set up training schedules and found a local dog club with members who competed in agility. I started attending seminars, reading books, and looking for opportunities to learn from other people.

My first concern was how to run and keep up with a fast Standard Poodle. I had already limited many activities I participated in because of my knees. I had had surgery on each knee and I had knee pain that I dealt with daily. How was I going to run and train a dog in agility?

Knee problems are common with agility competitors. How often do we see people at trials with obvious knee problems? There are the visible signs, the various knee braces that competitors wear, but we have no idea how many knee supports are not visible or how many people compete only with the help of anti-inflammatory drugs or pain medication. And we don't know how many people spend evenings with ice packs on their troubled knees.

One Handler's Experience with a Total Knee Replacement

By Steve Sobreski



In *Switching Sides* Kay Guetzloff observes that "many of the exhibitors were wearing knee braces.... Knee problems certainly appear to be a serious problem in this sport. In fact, I know of one obedience exhibitor who went to a Halloween party dressed in shorts and wearing a knee brace. She went dressed as an agility exhibitor!" *Switching Sides* was published in 1999, and most of us (and our knees) aren't getting any younger.

So, you cope; you learn how to manage pain; you learn how to run with a sore knee or a gimpy knee. You try to minimize the amount of running you have to do on a course. If front crosses hurt your knees, you learn other handling strategies; you make sure you're not wearing footwear that will catch in the grass. And you do a lot of sitting at trials, resting your knees for your next runs.

Many of these strategies worked for me for several years. I was able to train my dog, attend seminars, and enter trials. But I always felt limited by knees that wouldn't cooperate and prevented my running and participating fully with a fast athletic Standard Poodle. After watching *Agility Foundation Training* by Greg

Derrett I realized the limitations I faced in our training; I so much wanted to be able to run and do the flat work exercises he demonstrated in his video.

I eventually made the decision to find another agility puppy—I was going to avoid all the mistakes I made with my first agility dog. I already knew that in a few years I was facing some decisions about my knee—my right knee—the knee that had surgery over 12 years ago, that caused me daily pain, and that I iced every evening. So when I brought Yukon, my Standard Poodle puppy, home two years ago I knew that I'd be facing some tough decisions. I was hoping I'd have time to do the agility foundation training I wanted with Yukon and get him started on beginning and intermediate agility training before I faced surgery and the prospects of recovery and physical therapy.

This Isn't Going To Work!

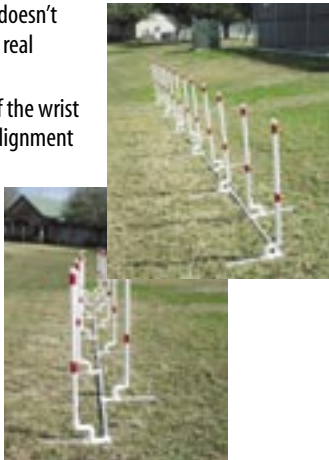
For the next two years I was able to work with both Poodles. I was able to get Yukon through agility foundation training and all the way to a class for getting dogs ready to compete. Things changed in January 2005: I started having some severe problems with my right leg, enough that I couldn't train or compete at times. I made an appointment to see my doctor.

After an MRI of my lower back I was diagnosed as having sciatica problems, which led to a series of treatments. Some helped but nothing permanent; and it was getting increasingly difficult to train and compete. At the end of July I reached a low point, ending up in the hospital with complications from the degenerative condition in my right knee. Now I knew I had to face the decision to have a total knee replacement (TKR).

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Training Decisions

I had run out of options. My right knee was making it almost impossible to train and compete in the sport I loved. I continued to work with both of my Poodles, but training was a day-to-day decision based on how I felt. By this time I mostly couldn't



run with my dogs so we worked on exercises from "Unleashing the Velcro Dog," a column by Jane Simmons-Moake in *CR*.

I started doing things differently in the months leading up to surgery. I decided to go back and do more foundation training with both my dogs. I started doing simple targeting exercises. Yukon learned targeting as a puppy, but Woola was never exposed to targeting and as a result we have had contact problems. So here was an opportunity to reinforce Yukon's already good targeting skills and retrain Woola's contacts using targeting.

I also worked on exercises that I thought I would be able to do on crutches after the TKR. I had crutches from earlier in the summer and used them while practicing drills—turns and switches, around and side, through my leg exercises, and some work with my table and contact ramp that sit in my driveway. We also worked on some *Go Out* exercises I set up in my backyard and I continued play/tug training sessions with both dogs.

I also looked for opportunities to contact others who had experienced a TKR. Around this time a new online discussion group was formed, Agility Knees (<http://groups.yahoo.com/group/AgilityKnees/>), that became an incredibly valuable resource. I was able to talk with many people who have gone through a TKR or who were in my position, facing the decision to have the surgery. I was able to ask if people were able to continue agility training and competing after surgery and what restrictions it placed on them.

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Do you have an orthopedic surgeon who can answer questions about the surgical procedure and is willing to spend time answering all your concerns?

Does the hospital where you are having surgery have a staff that specializes in treating joint replacement patients?

What you need to know or consider before deciding to have a TKR

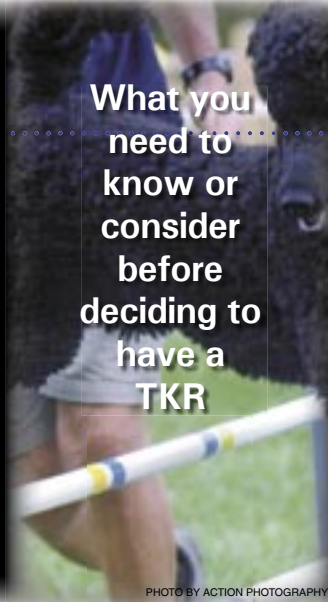


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Physical therapy after your TKR is critical; has this been explained and do you have physical therapy options that are convenient?

Will you have somebody to help with your care the first two weeks? If you live alone you will need to consider having some in-home care.

Does your doctor understand what your goals and objectives are after you have a TKR; for example, does your doctor understand what agility is and what competing in agility involves?

Making a Tough Decision

My doctor stressed that a TKR is an elective procedure. He told me what he saw and what his recommendations were, but ultimately I had to be the one to make the decision to go ahead with the surgery. I did research and asked a lot of questions. I had several office visits with Dr. Bozarth and had exams and MRI and x-ray sessions. I made my first surgery appointment for mid-September, but I actually called it off. I decided that I needed more information, so I scheduled another appointment with my doctor. My wife came to the appointment with me and we had a list of questions which he very patiently answered.

If you're considering a TKR, make sure that you:

- **Find a surgeon you trust:** I was fortunate that the surgeon I chose had already operated on my right knee 12 years ago. I had a good relationship with him and found him easy to talk to; he was approachable and willing to answer questions. I did some checking and couldn't find anything negative about him.
- **Check out the hospital where the surgery will be done:** My surgery was scheduled to take place at St. Elizabeth Regional Medical Center, which had a highly regarded Joint Replacement Center. A few weeks before my surgery I attended an extremely helpful Joint Replacement Class. The class explained exactly what would happen from check-in for surgery until discharge. I received a 90-page workbook that discussed everything from being admitted to the hospital to the physical and occupational therapy I would receive while in the hospital. The staff of the Joint Replacement Center stressed that we were not sick people but patients with bad knees; so we wouldn't be dressed in a hospital gown but would be in comfortable loose fitting clothes; like sweat pants. I liked that immediately.

- **Look at making some changes around the house:** Because of the Joint Replacement Class my wife and I were able to make some changes in the house that would help me after surgery. But I was stubborn and didn't take many of the recommendations made during the Joint Replacement Class. I was determined to get by with just crutches instead of a walker. I didn't think we needed to make modifications to our bathroom such as rail hand supports. For the most part this worked.
- **Make plans for physical therapy:** While in the hospital I would have PT twice a day, but I needed to arrange for physical therapy after I left the hospital. I wanted to work with a physical therapist I knew so arranged PT sessions that started the day after I left the hospital.

All that was left was getting through the weeks leading up to the surgery date. As my doctor had told me more than once, having a TKR is a serious decision and once the surgery is done you can't go back. I told him that I was really apprehensive about the surgery, and he told me I had every reason to feel that way. Dr. Bozarth was honest and didn't sugarcoat anything. He told me, and I had heard this from several people, that there was some serious pain associated with the surgery; TKR surgery hurts. Hey, I've suffered through a lot of injuries so how bad could it really be?

Well, I found out and it wasn't pretty—more on that next month! But I'm so happy that I had the surgery. I feel great and I'm back walking, hiking, riding my bike, swimming, and best of all training my Poodles. I'm able to run better than I have in years. 🐕

Author's Note: The Agility Knees group was an invaluable resource that helped me prepare for surgery. The group was started and organized by LeAnna Sanders. LeAnna's first attempt at TKR led to complications and she was unable to have the surgery. She is determined to have surgery in 2006 and all of the list members will be anxiously waiting her successful TKR surgery.