

# The News Journal

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## Loss of a friend brings heartbreak, memories

Last month I lost the best hunting companion anyone could ever wish for. Starr Point's Gustav "Gus" of Glenside JH, my 10 1/2-year-old vizsla and inspiration for many of my bird hunting articles, blog posts and videos, succumbed to a long illness.

True to his breed, Gus' instinctive passion for seeking, pointing and retrieving game was matched by his never-ending loyalty. Born to hunt and work, he continued to exemplify these traits through his final days by dutifully pointing rabbits in the yard, steadfastly guarding the front door, sternly keeping his new vizsla housemate Luke in line, and peacefully sleeping at my feet.



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STEVEN KENDUS

Gus was my first dog. He was a superb field companion who, on hunting days, was always awake before I was and first into the truck.

He also was a house-kept pet who shared strong bonds with family members.

As Gus' illness progressed and as his deteriorating condition became more apparent, I displayed a tough-guy facade. Inside, however, I was falling apart.

Hoping for the best (not willing to accept the truth, really), I continued to bring Gus to various veterinarians and specialists for tests and treatment. I spoke with friends, consulted with other vizsla owners and breeders, and conducted online research. In the end, however, I had no choice but to accept his prognosis.

I fully acknowledge the paradox of a hunter contemplating the death of an animal, but I never had to deal with a dying pet before. The tangled knot in my stomach grew with each passing day, and I felt helpless as Gus looked at me seemingly seeking comfort.

Struggling to keep my emotions in check, I approached the situation with as much logic as I could. The cold reality of certain death was blatantly obvious, and the only thing I had any control over was the



Gus accompanied the author on nearly 200 hunting trips. PHOTO COURTESY STEVEN KENDUS

quality of his remaining days. Considering our interminable bond and the mutual understanding between us that only other pet owners fully comprehend, I believed with certainty that he did not want to spend his last days incapacitated. My final thank you to him would be peacefully ending his suffering.

I hoped to spend a few more days with Gus, so I made what I thought was a final call to Gus' veterinarian. In a businesslike fashion, I set a date and time to bring him for his last visit. Later that day, Gus' condition worsened, so I called and rescheduled for that evening.

Still with a workmanlike approach, I watched family members say tearful goodbyes to Gus before I loaded him into my truck. The 10-minute ride to the vet was over way too quickly, and I couldn't help but think about the times Gus and I spent driving to and from hunting locations. I recalled how his excited barking, panting and whining while driving to a hunting spot were totally offset by his curled up sleeping brought about by post-hunt exhaustion.

When I opened the door to bring him out of the truck, I thought of the smell of his wet hair after an early-morning, dew-covered hunt, and the sight of his muddy paw prints on my back seat. I thought of sapping thickets and corn fields, pheasants and woodcocks, and praise from other hunters.

When we entered the vet's office, there was no waiting period. We were ushered

straight to an exam room, where I was informed of the particulars of the pending euthanasia procedure and the post-procedure options. Truth be told, I saw lips moving and I heard words, but I really didn't comprehend anything. My mind was elsewhere. I thought of happier times. I calculated that Gus and I hunted together nearly 180 times, we harvested about 800 birds, and he brought about 90,000 hours of enjoyment to our family.

When the procedure began, I was quickly flooded with the realization that it could not be undone. The finality was unlike anything else I'd been presented with. My happy thoughts turned to frantic questions: Is this the right decision? Did I do everything I could?

Satisfied with my answers, I knelt beside Gus, removed his collar, covered him with my arms, and laid my head to his side.

After the veterinarian confirmed his heart stopped, she said I could stay as long as I needed to. Talking through the lump in my throat with the manliest voice I could muster, I told her I needed no more time and rushed out.

I returned to my empty truck in a stupor. As I inserted the key in the ignition, I saw Gus' hunting bell in the cup holder. In a jarring rush of emotion, I could only weep.

Steven Kendus' Hunter's Journal appears bi-monthly in The News Journal. Kendus is the author of "Hunting The First State: A Guide to Delaware Hunting." Follow Kendus at [www.HuntingTheFirstState.com](http://www.HuntingTheFirstState.com) and on Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Contact him at [skendus@HuntingTheFirstState.com](mailto:skendus@HuntingTheFirstState.com).