

# Puppy Love... It's a Family Affair

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“Whoever said you can't buy happiness forgot little puppies.”

- *Gene Hill*

I have to agree with one of my favorite outdoor writers, Mr. Gene Hill. Having a puppy equals happiness, but having ten puppies equates to absolute love!

The day is August 26, 2014, and our dog, Duchess Gracie Decota, is in labor. We have a family team at the house to help with the whelping. My brother-in-law Bruce Franklin, who is a retired doctor, is there with his daughter McKenna and wife Jill. Bruce is in the whelping room with my son Michael and me.

McKenna and Jill are stationed out of the room; they will log times, weights, markings and such as the pups are born. My wife June and son Nick are also just outside of the room manning the heated containers and ready to hand supplies into the room as needed.

Cota has been in labor all night long, and I have been with her every minute of her labor. This is Cota's first litter, and I want her to know I'm right there to support and help her in whatever she needs. At 9:07 am Cota starts to spin in circles, stops and starts to arch her back. I see the head of the first puppy making its way into a new world, a miracle happening before my very eyes. At 9:10 am the first puppy is born, a beautiful female, 8.8 ounces.

Whoever said there is no such thing as love at first sight never watched a puppy being born!

Cota continues to deliver her puppies throughout the day. Each time she stands up from her pups, circles and starts arching her back, we move her whelped puppies to a heated box and let her concentrate on the birth of her next pup. All goes well until the sixth pup, and then the unthinkable happens. Cota delivers a very small stillborn puppy,

less than half the size of all the others. I do everything in my power to bring the pup back to life, but there's just no saving this pup. It will never get to lick my face or wag its tail, and I will never get to give it a rub behind its ear. I have the family give Cota her other pups right away to distract her from my leaving the room with the stillborn puppy.

I take the puppy to our kitchen, clean it, wrap it up nicely and then I hang my head over our sink and cry. I have just come from one of the highest, happiest emotions that a person can feel, to one of the lowest in a matter of minutes and the sadness overwhelms me... I cry hard. My wife June comes to my rescue and rubs my back and tells me it's okay, we did all we could do. I pull myself together and head back to the whelping room to be there with my Cota-girl.

Within the next couple of hours Cota whelps two more healthy puppies. During Cota's pregnancy, we had done a couple of ultrasounds, and each time our vet had determined that there were nine pups. We all know that ultrasounds are not an exact science in determining puppy count, but our vet is pretty darn good at this. So we all wait patiently to see if we'll have another puppy. At this point we have seven healthy pups and one in the hands of our Lord.

After a two-hour wait Cota stands up and starts to circle again. As I call to the others and state that she may be having another pup, Cota starts to arch her back. And then it happens again; a very small stillborn pup pops out. But this pup is a bit larger than the first. I quickly rip the bag off of the pup and notice there's just a trace of color on this pup. I clear out the nose with a suction bulb, then

push a tube into the lungs and clear the lungs. My son Michael already has a hair dryer blowing softly on the puppy to keep it warm while I rub the pup to see if we can revive it... then another miracle takes place before my eyes—the head makes a slight movement. I yell, “It moved!” and keep rubbing. Its head moves again as I rub and pray, then the wonderful sound of a small squeak resonates from the puppy. The dead silence in the house breaks into the sounds of a crowd witnessing a Super Bowl winning touchdown, and again the tears roll down my cheeks. This puppy weighs in at only five ounces, but she is alive and well.

As I sit next to the whelping box I am overwhelmed with joy. Cota had done it, whelped all nine puppies. She is tired, but she's a good mother and cleans her newborn puppies as they suckle. The half-pint pup is too small to suckle on a teat. So my wife blends her amazing supplement, and I give this beautiful puppy its first meal with an eyedropper.

After about an hour-and-a-half, Cota gets up and wants to go outside. To be safe, I go with her. As she squats to urinate, I see the head of another puppy. “Oh my goodness, she's having a puppy right here in the backyard!” I yell to the family. Bruce comes running out with a hemostat and iodine, and my wife comes running out with a towel. Within seconds, Cota delivers another five-ounce, healthy pup.

We quickly go inside to clean and warm the pup, but Cota still wants to stay outside and go to the bathroom. My son Michael stays with her while the rest of us go in to work on our second half-pint pup. Within



minutes, Jill and McKenna start yelling that Michael needs me right now at the front door. I rush to the door, and there on the front porch is my son holding a full size puppy in one hand and a placenta in the other, the umbilical cord hangs loosely between the two. Back to action goes the family, and within minutes Cota is in her whelping box feeding her eight full-size puppies as the rest of us feed the two little half-pints with an eyedropper. We now have a total of ten pups... so much for ultrasounds.

To say that we felt like we had just ridden a roller-coaster of emotions is an understatement!

From that day forward, our love and bond between our family and the puppies grow

stronger and stronger each day. Family members from my eighty-eight-year-old father to my three-month-old granddaughter come by to help socialize all the pups.

My wife June continues to blend her amazing supplement as the pups grow and are weaned from their mother. Jill and McKenna come by almost every day to help feed and socialize the puppies and my sons, Michael and Nick, not only help with all the cleaning of the whelping area and puppy pen, but also the dew claws and tail docking.

As the pups grow we get to watch their eyes open for the first time, as well as the change from a baby blue color to their natural brown. We get to hear their first real

barks, witness their first points on a pheasant wing, see their introduction to water in our small baby pool, and so much more.

Not only is our love for them growing by the day, but their love for us was as well. One step into the puppy pen and you better look out because ten puppies wanted to be in your lap... all at once. Soon the pups are allowed to go outside in our yard. At times I feel like the Pied Piper with all the puppies following me throughout the house and into the yard.

By six weeks, the puppies have their own little personalities, and the family has given them all names. Some of the forever families start coming by to see their future family member. And we all know that the eight-week mark is quickly approaching.

These magnificent balls of love have become a part of our family and have won our hearts. We can't imagine our home without them, but in a blink of an eye it's here. The pups are just over eight weeks old, and the day has come for them to go to their forever homes. I know they are all going to great homes, because I've interviewed each new family myself. I have literally spent hours and hours speaking with folks who wanted one of our puppies, and I'm confident with every family that was chosen to take one of our babies away—but that doesn't make it any easier.

We plan a big barbeque at the house for the day the pups are going to leave—we need the moral support. I smoked some salmon, and other family members and friends came over with food, drinks and guitars to sit around and watch the puppies meet and leave with their forever families. It's a bitter-sweet day. We're all so happy for each pup and their forever family, yet our hearts are saddened because a piece of each of our hearts goes with every pup. No matter where they are, they will always be a part of our family. You see, for us, puppy love is a family affair, and we wouldn't have it any other way.

Yep, Gene Hill had it right when he stated, "Whoever said you can't buy happiness forgot little puppies."

But, to me, the love for a puppy and from a puppy is priceless.

*Author's Note: At the time of this writing, Cota's pup's are just over seven months old, and the first pup, Rex, has tested for NA and received a maximum Prize I, 112 points. Like mother, like son: Cota herself has received a maximum UT Prize I, 204 points, and will be at this year's Invitational.* 🐾

