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Ernie the pup is back on all fours after surgery to fix diseased hip

By Andrea Byl
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Dog walked on 2 legs to avoid pain; grant helped pay for care

Ernie is a black, nine-pound puppy who won't put weight on his hind legs.

So when the poodle mix came to the attention of the Animal Placement Bureau in Lansing, volunteers assumed he'd been hit by a car.

"The way he walks is the funniest thing about him," said Maggie Striz, a volunteer at the bureau.

"Long story short, (we had him) checked out and discovered he had Leggs-Perthes disease."

Leggs-Perthes disease (LPD) is a deterioration of the hip joint where the ball of the femur begins to crumble in the socket, causing intense pain, said Lorna Elliott, a bureau board member.

The disease occurs not only in canines, but humans as well, Elliott added.

About 2 percent of small breeds are affected by the disease, experts said.



(Photo by Kevin W. Fowler/For the Lansing State Journal)

Best feet forward: Ernie, who was born with Leggs-Perthes disease, sniffs around the yard Sunday of his Animal Placement Bureau foster home in Lansing while recovering from hip surgery. His rear legs were too painful to walk on, so he stopped using them.

How to help

Contributions

- To donate money to the Animal Placement Bureau or to apply for adoption, visit www.apbpets.com.
- To make a donation to Orthodogs' Silver Lining Foundation, visit www.oslf.org.

Animal Placement Bureau

- Is a nonprofit organization
- Funded by private donations and fundraisers
- Does not receive any state, local, or federal funding

To adopt Ernie

- If you think you would like to adopt Ernie, contact the Animal Placement Bureau at 346-4505

Ernie, who is about a year old, walks on his front legs carrying his rear legs less than an inch off the ground - likely as an adaptation to avoid the pain, she said.

Up to \$4,000 to help

Only surgery can correct the rare genetic condition - surgery the bureau knew would be expensive, Elliott said.

As they began looking for orthopedic veterinarians to do the surgery, they realized it would cost more than their budget allowed; estimates for the surgery ranged from \$2,000 to \$4,000.

"We placed 307 dogs last year, many with major medical problems," she said.

"It's hard to decide who gets treated and who doesn't."

Yet Ernie's friendly and laid-back personality convinced those working with him that he would make a great pet, so they applied for a grant from Orthodogs' Silver Lining Foundation, an Internet-based organization that helps provide medical care for dogs when it can't be afforded, Elliott said.

"Of course, when you hear about a dog like that you say, 'Oh my goodness, we have to get this dog fixed up,' " said Brenda Osbourne, a founder of the foundation.

'A long way to go'

The foundation donated \$1,200 toward the surgery, and after finding a veterinarian who cut the cost from \$2,000 to \$1,400, the bureau paid the remaining \$200.

Nearly two weeks ago, Ernie went into surgery.

The crumbling end of each bone was cut off so scar tissue would grow in its place, forming an artificial ball joint, Elliott said.

"He's got a long way to go," Osbourne said.

"When you are used to not using your back legs, it takes some time. He just really doesn't know how to use those legs."

Striz took Ernie in as a part of the bureau's foster parent program and will be helping him recover while he waits to be adopted into a permanent home.

"We'll be doing a lot of physical therapy with him to build the muscles up in his hind legs," Striz said, adding that Ernie still uses his front legs to get around.

In good spirits

Despite the pain, Ernie is in good spirits, she said.

"A lot of times when dogs are in pain, they are unhappy and tend to snap at people, but Ernie loves to be around people and other animals," Striz said.

As an example, she described how Ernie befriended the pair of Irish wolfhounds next door, each weighing more than 100 pounds.

"His spirits are just so up, despite the pain," Elliott said, describing the poodle-mix as unusually laid back and mature for his age.

"He is just pleasant to be around."