

Biella, Dog Known for Her Exquisite Attunement, Dies at Age 6

Biella Bedotto, a gentle and often-times goofy Golden Retriever, died in Miami, Florida on 5/13/22.

Biella grew up in Miami and worked with her human companion, Holly Bedotto, PsyD in her psychology practice, DBT by Design. Biella greeted everyone with a toy and a wag. Her special people were met with a toothy smile.

Biella was a member of the South FL DBT Consortium, a group of mental health clinicians who treat high risk individuals who struggle with suicide, self-harm, and emotional dysregulation. Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT) is a behavioral therapy that teaches individuals not only how to understand their own behavioral patterns but also how to understand the foundations of all behavior in humans, and in our office, in animals as well, because behavioral change is more easily and rapidly recognized in animals. The team had fun engaging patients in training Biella when she was learning new tasks (operant learning, using positive reinforcement in the form of cookies or praise). And Biella was an enthusiastic learner and an integral part of the team.

Biella, also known as “B”, “Bug”, “Biells”, and “The B” was born at Summer Brook Acres in Alabama on February 25, 2016 to Tramin De Bon Matin (Micah), Sire from Ukraine and Dream Max From Paris With Love, Dam from Sweden. Biella was a sweet and calm pup who started her behavioral training immediately. She lived with cats, so they rightly taught her who was boss. At age four months, she developed a disorder, rare in Golden Retrievers, Hypertrophic Osteodystrophy (HOD) resulting in pain and what would become many hospitalizations and veterinary visits. Luckily, her veterinarian, Alexandra Conejos, DVM was a dear friend, so home visits were also frequent. Unknown until age two, Biella was born with a congenital liver condition, Intrahepatic Portosystemic Shunt. Usually, dogs are diagnosed at a very early age due to seizures and are often euthanized. Biella never displayed such overt symptoms. Once diagnosed, we found Brad Case, DVM at the University of FL Small Animal Hospital. He was one of few specialists in the U.S. who perform percutaneous transjugular coil embolization on dogs with this disorder. Dr. Case and his team of residents and students treated Biella with world class veterinary medicine. Upon meeting Dr. Case, Biella flopped down next to him on the floor. He laughed and called her “goofy”. It was B’s signal to Holly that they were in the right hands! Biella healed and was able to live with this chronic condition more comfortably. The median age for survival post-surgery is six years so Bug’s family knew she was on borrowed time. In these six years, despite her condition, B helped with the rehabilitation of patients as well as pets and brought comfort and countless joyful moments to all who knew her.

Under the guidance of her beloved trainer, Rose Lesniak, Biella obtained her Canine Good Citizen Certificate in 2017 and Service Animal status before having surgery at UF. This dog had a strong will under her sweet exterior. Following surgery, Rose helped Holly extinguish feared conditioned responses that resulted from so many medical interventions. Writings by Brian Hare, PhD, a professor of Evolutionary Anthropology whose research in the evolution of cognition at Duke University furthered Holly’s understanding of how dogs think and what they know. Claudia Fugazza, PhD a researcher at the Department of Ethology in Eötvös Loránd University (Budapest) helped Holly utilize her own knowledge of social learning theory to train Biella using behavioral modeling. And finally, Alexandra Horowitz, PhD, who heads the Canine Cognition Lab at Barnard College, opened Holly’s nose to what our dogs know through smell. Sniffing walks were frequent, particularly in the woods! Dr. Horowitz’s obituary she wrote for her dog, Finnegan, inspired Holly to write Biella’s. Dogs may not be people, but they lead important, exemplary lives, inspire humans, and they leave an indelible mark on those who know them.

When Biella wasn't entertaining human and canine friends at home in Miami, Biella flew to Virginia often, pre-pandemic, to visit family. The Rockfish Valley, outside of Charlottesville was Biella's favorite place. She was able to take walks in the woods every morning quietly observing the deer, squirrels, and bunnies. She loped and swam in her cousin, Frisco's creek and pond. She was enchanted by the family's goats and Guinea fowl. She smelled the flowers, rolled in deer dung and could be a dog. She was happiest dirty, smelly and with a chicken soup stain on her chest. Homemade chicken soup was a staple in her diet. She was a true gourmet and wine lover despite her liver condition. If you showed Biella a wine glass and said "wine?" she would lick the glass enthusiastically for a sip. She mostly enjoyed mildly acidic red wines from Northern Italy, but she was known to sample other varietals.

Biella's name comes from Biella, Italy, a small industrial city in the north near the Swiss border. Holly's paternal grandfather's family was from Biella where they worked in the silk trade. Holly's grandfather owned a silk mill in Allentown, PA practicing the trade handed down through generations. Biella took after him – fair in complexion and tenacious in personality.

Spring of 2020 brought the world to a halt. These were good times for the animals. Biella was able to relax with her cats while Holly worked at home. They took many road trips to Virginia, stopping once in the Outer Banks for Fall morning romps on the beach. Biella was able to be in Virginia for a month at a time on a much more frequent basis. In the last weeks of her life, she was surrounded by her large loving family and was able to be the dog she loved to be. Biella is survived by her three felines, Talullah, Banjo, and her best cat pal, Pyewacket (a well-trained 17 lb charismatic and temperamental Siamese). Her many human friends from near and far will miss her terribly. She will always be in our hearts. Her star shines bright.

