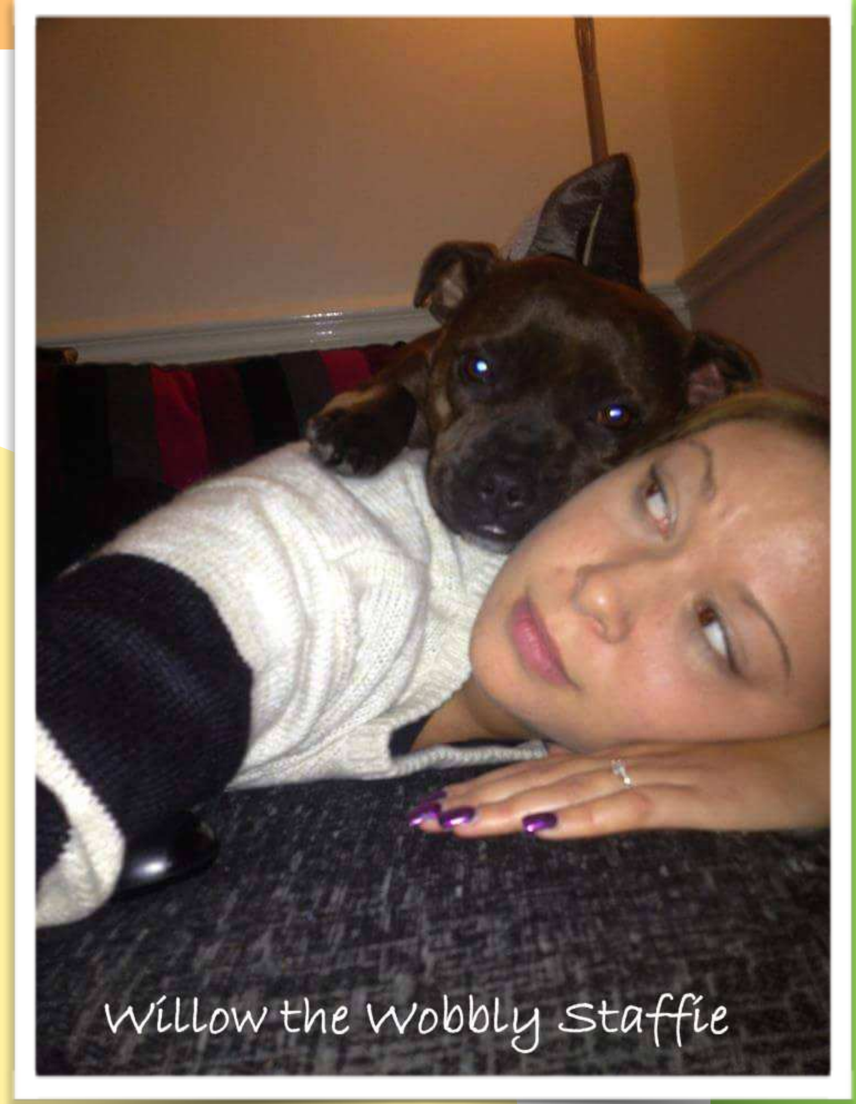
Living with L2-HGA

by Andrea Phillips



Our L2-HGA journey began in 2011. I took Willow to the vets on a couple of occasions as I’d noticed her walking on tiptoes and kicking her hind legs out and a curved spine. Our first vet diagnosed this as a pulled muscle but unhappy with his diagnosis, I felt there was more to the way she was walking, I changed my vet. There they asked me to send them videos that they could send to contacts studying canine neurology. It was about then that I learnt about L2HGA and the test to detect for presence of the condition. Within weeks the swab was taken, sent off and returned a positive diagnosis. Willow was only 11 months old.

Willow's 'dolly' walk -

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VSA1vwRTRmo

There was lots of information available online about the symptoms and testing for breeding purposes but little about actually living with the condition. There are two variants; one with seizures and the other without. Willow didn’t suffer from the seizures so we didn’t discuss medication options with my vet but we did need to learn what her triggers were; weather, exercise, excitement and stress all seemed to affect Willow. Once you have a diagnosis, you can attribute a lot of quirks to the condition, such as staring into space, wobbly head, funny gait, slow learning. She only had the capacity and patience for basic commands and her lack of balance made ‘paw’ or anything more than this difficult so I was happy for her just to have basic manners.

The lack of information for the L2-HGA owner led to my starting a blog and then a Facebook page, Willow the Wobbly Staffie, as a way of raising awareness and also to document her journey. This, in turn, led to connections to people within the SBT network in the UK to provide information on how they have been able to breed out the condition.

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Living on a day to day basis with L2 for us consisted of making sure Willow had jumpers and blankets in winter to keep her warm, to changing the flooring throughout the house. One of the effects of the condition meant that she had no control of her toilet habits. She was completely house trained but her body and brain weren't in sync. She had no traction control so we swapped our laminate flooring for carpet – that also helped with the temperature.

Willow was the most snuggly, cuddly, loving dog and we had a special bond but I couldn't take her out for walks for longer than 20 minutes as her legs would spasm and she'd struggle for hours. After the worst episode, she was rendered completely immobile and her muscles were rock solid.

In 2014, we started to notice a change in Willow. She became more withdrawn and began taking herself off on her own, spending less time with us. She was more aggressive to other dogs and when I got her diagnosis we were advised this was the step before seizures would begin. My husband and I had already agreed that we would not medicate her and if her quality of life was to be negatively affected, we would make that most difficult of decisions. 16th January turned out to be that day – she was only 3 years and 4 months old.

Willow the Wobbly Staffie

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Willow’s Facebook page has over only has 500 likes but we have been asked a lot of questions from people all over the world and even had dogs diagnosed as a result of their owners finding her page. One of those dogs was owned by our friend, Dee Bates. His name was Logan and in June 2016, we asked Dee if she would be happy for him to be our ambassador for Willows page.

Logan was a rescue dog and went to live with Millie and William with his mum, Dee. Dee was unaware of L2-HGA and just thought the mild symptoms she noticed were down to his bad start in life but in April of the same year, Logan was out for a walk with his friends when his legs began to shake. Dee took him home to rest but when she went back to him 20 minutes later, he was having a full seizure. After an emergency visit to the vet, it was decided that L2 could be the cause and Dee sent a test to the Animal Health Trust…sadly it came back positive.

Logan was restricted to short on-lead walks, kept warm and quiet when need be and a close eye was kept on him, constantly looking for the signs of another attack or that he was tiring.

William is a ‘trick dog’ and Logan often joined in and loved to learn a few tricks of his own. Dee also kept an eye on Logan’s diet as she noticed there was a marked difference in his health when he was given beef protein so this was removed from his diet

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Logan attended local dog shows promoting awareness of L2 but only for short periods of time or where he could rest comfortably, but Dee was always painfully aware of her boy's condition and the constant worry of having an L2 dog. Some days he would be physically fine but his brain wasn't quite working right; this earned him the nickname 'Little Bobble Head' with his ping pong brain.

Although Logan was on meds for his condition, Dee was painfully aware that quality of life was important for him and sadly in March this year, just shy of his 5th birthday, Logan took his last trip after a particularly bad couple of weeks. His temperament changed and Dee realised this wasn't the boy she knew and loved and made the heart-breaking decision to let him go.

This was the reality and consequence of Willow's parents not being tested for L2HGA. Willow's and Logan's stories are bitter-sweet – **completely preventable** but without them we wouldn't have the memories or these stories to tell to help raise awareness of how to eradicate this condition.

Thank you from The Stafford Knot to Andrea Phillips, Gemma Proctor and Dee Bates for sharing this story and for creating the FB page - Willow the Wobbly Staffie - Living with L2-HGA. This devastating disease is completely preventable and can be totally eradicated if all breeders tested their Staffords prior to mating them and never bred carriers together.