

Daily Herald

The smartest dog in the world

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By David McGrath

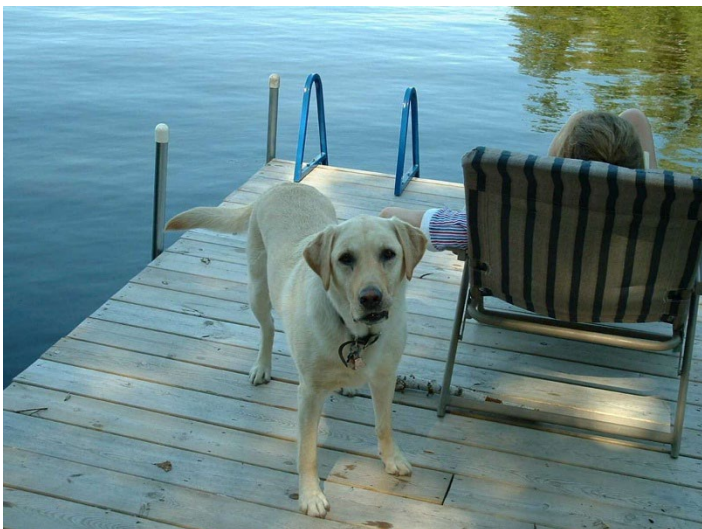
“Chaser, a Border Collie born in 2004, held the largest tested memory of any non-human animal. She could identify and retrieve 1,022 toys by name.” (Miami Herald, 3/23/2026).

It is high time I set the record straight, so weary I am of hearing about the famous dog they call brilliant since she's able to — get this — fetch a bunch of toys on command.

Astute readers understand that distinguishing between different toys, much like guessing the capital cities of our states, requires a much lower level of intelligence than, say, playing chess and thinking three moves ahead. Everyone, therefore, will easily see that the yellow lab that my wife Marianne and I owned was vastly superior when it came to deep-thinking.

I named him “Frank” after my closest friend in high school who died too young. To his credit, my dog never pretended to be another Frank Oberle, though he would not have objected to a comparison with, say, an Aristotle or Einstein.

I knew Frank was a genius because he only ever performed one trick.



Frank, whose worldview valued friendship and loyalty far more than bragging rights about class rank or a diploma, relaxes by the lake. (David McGrath)

The preceding sentence may seem contradictory, except that animal researchers have declared that really smart dogs have minds of their own and do not care to follow instructions.

In other words, when Frank was six months old, sixty pounds, and enrolled in Canine College in Midlothian, he was the only dog out of 16 who, when I issued the “stay” command while backing slowly away, would, instead, get up off his haunches and follow me, grinning and nuzzling my shins with his nose.

He did it every time, twice a week, until the eighth week when I decided to stop paying the \$24 per class, since, clearly, as per the researchers, and as I told Marianne when she asked if Frank might be a bit slow: “He’s not a sheep, honey.”

I did not mean, not a sheep-dog, but not a conformist like those other 16.

“Aw, he may be a dropout, but he’s sweet,” and she bent down to embrace the blonde bundle of fur, Frank all waggly, twining himself around her like a cat.

“Tell me, Marianne, was John Steinbeck dumb?”

“What?”

“He went to Stanford not even a year. Dropped out and wrote *Grapes of Wrath*.”

“You think Frank will win the Nobel Prize for literature?”

She has a quirky sense of humor but did not disagree when I explained how Frank’s perceived disobedience in college showed that his worldview valued friendship and loyalty far more than bragging rights about class rank or a diploma.

A similar misconception was clarified when my elder daughter Jackie visited with what she said was a present for Frank. She loves all dogs and Frank would run circles around the living room, stopping only to scratch himself, whenever she visited. She had a dog of her own back at her home, name of Jill. Jackie and Jill, get it?

Jackie removed from her bag a puzzle ball that resembled a plastic disco ball about the size of a grapefruit. She said it took Jilly about 15 minutes to figure out how to roll it around with her snout until a dog biscuit fell through one of the small apertures.

“Let’s see how Frank performs,” she said, and she took the ball into the kitchen to fill with Liva Snaps.

I felt panicky. Jilly, a female, of course, was a calm but wary pooch, who growled if I accidentally touched her head. But she was also a black lab, so fairly smart; and if it took her a whole 15 minutes, it must be the New York Times of puzzle balls.

Frank intercepted Jackie emerging from the kitchen, his nose glued to the ball as she ferried it into the living room.

Following his sagacious realization that the hard plastic ball was too large to inhale, Frank tried grinding the side of it between his teeth while clutching it between his paws. He kept at it until I feared the cracking of either his teeth or the ball.

Finally, he stood up, looked at both of us and emitted a single bark, pregnant with meaning.

“Clearly, an invalid test, Jack.”

“But Jilly was able to do it.”

I grasped the ball and shook out a handful of Liva Snaps which Frank immediately lapped up, his exuberant tail knocking over a lamp.

Meanwhile, I explained to Jack, who has a PhD, that similar to the studies in her academic journals that often mistakenly construe causality with coincidence, the puzzle ball fails to fully account for the power of imagination. And how Frank’s was so vastly more advanced than Jilly’s that in his mind, he was already virtually tasting the Liva Snaps. Which meant that for him, the puzzle ball constituted senseless torture. Thus, his plaintive protestation.

I know, I know: Some readers may think I exaggerate Frank’s intellect. Far from it. I challenge anyone out there to show me another dog who can secure and deliver his own food bowl on queue. And I don’t mean just any bowl, but one of those stainless-steel untippable floor-huggers that my guy snaps into the air with his paw, like a tidily wink, and catches in his mouth before bringing it to me to fill.

Tricks like catching a frisbee or jumping through a hoop – Frank and I roll our eyes. Those are for circuses or dog and pony shows.

Frank was a meat and potatoes guy, a thoughtful Labrador pragmatist whose sole “trick” related to survival.

Which is why when our guy passed away over a decade ago, we considered donating his brain to veterinary science. Good thing, however, in the nick of time, I realized that if anyone’s neurons had the potential for psychic communication beyond the grave, it was those of good old Frank.

Who conveyed a request (I'm 75% sure it came from Frank) that this op-ed be read with an open mind and a dog lover's heart.

• *David McGrath is emeritus English professor, College of DuPage. Frank's essay is adapted from the soon-to-be released **Piggy Toe Mountain**, his newest collection of Chicagoland stories. Email him at mcgrathd@dupage.edu*