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# Ryan-VHUP Case Study Update: K-9 Diablo – A Year Later

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# Ryan-VHUP Case Study Update

## *K-9 Diablo – A year later*

BY KELLY STRATTON

**A** year ago this month, a dog named Diablo was fighting for his life in the Intensive Care Unit at the Matthew J. Ryan Veterinary Hospital at the University of Pennsylvania (Ryan-VHUP). A member of the New Castle County Police K-9 unit in New Castle, Delaware, he'd been shot in his left hind leg and in his chest in the line of duty.

Dr. Elaine Holmes, now a third-year surgery resident at Ryan-VHUP, and Dr. Kimberly Agnello, assistant professor of surgery, performed a successful repair of Diablo's shattered leg (his chest wound was a graze), but post-op, the dog's status took a turn for the worst as he battled pneumonia in the Hospital's ICU. Twenty-some days later, the dog had progressed enough to be released to the care of his handler, Corporal Chris Sarnecky.

After a few months of bed rest, Diablo was ready to start physical therapy.

### Post-op PT

"We tried to get him on a treadmill in the water, but he hated it," said Corporal Sarnecky, "so we tried to get him in the pool without using the treadmill. He hated that, too, but one day he decided he liked it. So we'd go twice a week, I'd put his little vest on and throw the ball for him for 30 minutes at a time. It was amazing how fast he grew muscle in a couple of weeks."

Diablo was getting stronger, but he wasn't out of the woods.

"His plate has had an infection on it since they put it in," said Corporal Sarnecky. "He was treated with antibiotics and that seemed to work, but the infection came back."

The pesky infection just wouldn't go away and so Dr. Holmes and Dr. Agnello decided they'd take a look at the plate and consider removing a couple of screws to abate the problem. After taking X-rays at Diablo's early-September checkup, however, they opted to remove the entire plate.

"Everything went very well," said Dr. Holmes. "He had developed a chronic draining wound over the distal aspect (bottom part) of his plate. We attempted to manage that conservatively with antibiotics while he continued to heal his bone and build up a strong diaphysis (middle part) where it was destroyed by the bullet. We took X-rays prior

to his explant that showed improved bone stock so we went forward and removed the plate and all of the screws. He was walking well on both legs when he left the hospital."

In October, Diablo's X-rays showed that new bone growth was evident at the screw-hole sites — a positive piece of news for Corporal Sarnecky — and Diablo.

### The Family Dog

During Diablo's recovery, Corporal Sarnecky acquired a new dog with which he can train. Cooper, also a Belgian Malinois, is a lot like Diablo.

"I picked Cooper out myself and I knew what I was looking for — a high working drive and a dog that was social with people," said Corporal Sarnecky. "When I first got Diablo he was so go-go-go and I thought, 'This dog is crazy.' But he wanted to go to work. When we hit the street, I loved it. Cooper has that same type of personality."

While the two dogs have not yet been introduced for safety reasons, Diablo knows there's another dog there, said Corporal Sarnecky. "He looks at me like, 'What's going on here?'"

Cooper and Corporal Sarnecky started training together in mid-September. And Diablo? He's become an official member of the Sarnecky Family.

"He becomes the family dog," said Corporal Sarnecky. "He's good with my 2-1/2-year old and my 1-year old. When he comes flying at them full force, it can be a little much, but he's still young, he's got a lot of energy and he's great with them."

Overall, Diablo is a complete success story.

"When he's walking, there's a little hobble in his step," said Corporal Sarnecky. "If you didn't know something major had happened to him, you would never be able to tell what he went through."

Dr. Agnello agrees.

"We're all very excited to see him return to his unrestricted normal activity," she said. "And hopefully his infection is cleared and he no longer limps or has any pain. He is a great dog with a lot of energy and we hope he can return doing all the things he loves!"

*For a short video clip of Diablo during aqua-therapy, visit [www.vet.upenn.edu](http://www.vet.upenn.edu).*