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Service Dog “Dyson” Gives Paralympic Owner a New Chance at Life

By [Ranny Green](#)

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Representing Operation Rebound-Challenged Athletes Foundation in San Diego in 2018, Brandon Holiday and Dyson pose for a photo op.

[service dogs](#), [ACE Awards](#), [labrador retriever](#)

Dyson is one of five [2021 AKC Awards for Canine Excellence](#) recipients, winning the Service Dog category.

This category recognizes task-trained service dogs that enrich the lives of physically or mentally disabled

owners. Including but not limited to guide dogs for the blind, seizure alert dogs, hearing dogs, and balance dogs.

From 1998 until 2012 Brandon Holiday was a medical train wreck. His scorecard lists systemic lupus, left leg amputation, 10 heart attacks, mini pulmonary emboli, Addison's disease, and medicine-related diabetes. Throughout that seemingly never-ending corridor of doctor and hospital visits, the pain was excruciating.

But brighter days were ahead beginning in May 2013 when he visited [Susquehanna Service Dogs](#) in Grantville, Pennsylvania.

"I decided to get a service dog because I felt something was missing," he says. "I did not want to burden friends and family while trying to pursue athletic endeavors (para canoe) and have them worry about my safety."

Holiday, who was living alone in Maple Shade, Pennsylvania, applied to several organizations. A few months later he was invited to the Pennsylvania facility for a meet-and-greet with four potential canine companions.

He recalls that day: "A friend drove with me. Once we were there, they brought in each dog and instructed me to ask the dog a series of cues and commands such as sit, stay, heel, and a few others. This is aimed at seeing how responsive each dog is to you. I met Clara, Ciri, Shamrock, and Dyson. Shamrock was sharp and attentive; Clara and Siri were OK and performed fine; Dyson was like a dog with a purpose and came at me on a full gallop, where I wasn't sure if he was going to stop or knock me over. I couldn't stop laughing. He was just so lovable and wagging his nub the whole time."

Yes, that's right! The young [Labrador Retriever](#) had his tail docked because he kept breaking it from flamboyant happy tail movements, including against the side of a dog crate. He and Holiday clicked from the outset. "I left the Meet and Greet smiling from ear to ear," Holiday beams.



While preparing for the 2016 Paralympics, Holiday works out with personal trainer Kenneth Landon at Sweat Fitness in Conshohocken, Pennsylvania.

Matching With Dyson

But then began the seemingly forever wait of what dog he would be paired with.

“I had no clue which one had been selected for me so I stalked all of the Susquehanna Service Dogs social media pages. Finally, a few months later I received a letter saying I was going to team training and Dyson would be my partner.

“I now had a four-legged shadow who gave me the freedom to all the things I have been able to do today. If not for Dyson, I would not be here today,” Holiday insists.

Here are a few tasks this goofy but intuitive Labrador brings to the table: odor detection, finds cell phone and presses an emergency K9 phone that dials 911; open and close doors; retrieve items; turn lights on and off.

That umbilical connection between Holiday and Dyson, now 11, and the powerful narrative accompanying it has earned the pair the [2021 AKC Humane Fund Awards for Canine Excellence](#) service dog honor.



Following a workout, Holiday returns to an awaiting Dyson on the dock at Camden County Boathouse, Cooper River Park, in Pennsauken Township, New Jersey. Photo courtesy Caroline Twohill Photography.

Life Before a Service Dog

The 26-year-old Holiday was injured on the job while serving with the Salisbury (Maryland) City Police Department in 1998. Since that injury, he continued to experience DVT (Deep Vein Thrombosis), which is manifested by clots. From 1998-2005 he suffered six or seven heart attacks due to the clotting disorder.

In May 2006 his condition changed markedly. “One morning I woke up in extreme pain in my left leg. It wasn’t a cramp but a different type of pain. I knew it was a clot so I drove myself to a nearby ER. I made it to the parking garage and tried to walk toward the ER door but collapsed. I couldn’t get up because

of the excruciating pain. A security guard spotted me, rushed over with a wheelchair, and moved me into the ER.”

Tests revealed a clot in the popliteal artery behind the left knee. Initially he was told the leg would need to be amputated but doctors attempted for several days to dissolve the clot. However, a wound about 4-by-6 inches opened up, which resulted in about four months of care with medications and hyperbaric chamber use.

In August 2006, two toes were amputated because of gangrene, and a month later the leg was removed.

After losing his leg – and with the help of [Challenged Athletes Foundation](#) — he attended an adaptive sporting event called Extremity Games for a wide gamut of athletes who have undergone amputation or suffered from spinal-cord injuries, limb issues, and other varied medical challenges.

Not dismayed, in 2012 Holiday started an adaptive sports program called [Athletes with disAbilities Network NE](#), kayak being one of them.

But bumpy waters still loomed ahead after a heart attack and an auto accident, after which required four years of recover He qualified for the National Paralympics team in 2016, but he was unable to earn a sprint kayak canoeing berth on the Paralympics team in Rio de Janeiro.



Brandon and Dyson stand on the podium at Lake Lanier Olympic Park in Gainesville, Georgia, in 2014 after winning a 200-meter para canoe title.

Dyson's Life-Saving Aid

Dyson's significance physically and psychologically has been off the charts since 2013. "If not for him, I would not be here," Holiday emphasizes. "If I did not have a dog when I went into an adrenal crisis in 2016, I am not sure I would have made it out of my basement before my body shut down from a 105.5-degree fever from a stomach virus."

Holiday suffers from adrenal insufficiency triggered by lupus, hence supplements that with steroids.

He recalls an incident in December 2016 and credits Dyson with saving his life. "I thought I had food poisoning and slept in the basement so as to not keep Liz (Liz Vogel, Holiday's significant other) awake. Dyson was with me, of course, and I didn't feel that bad when I went to sleep. I work up burning up and didn't feel right.

"My cell phone was not with me, so I had Dyson find my phone, which he brought to me. I called Liz, then 911. Next, I sent Dyson to my K9 phone, which he pressed, which dials 911, as well. I was unable to walk, so Dyson helped me crawl up the stairs by getting behind and pushing me."

Paramedics drove him to the hospital and injected steroids which allowed his 105.5 temperature to return to normal.



Holiday participates in fundraising for the Challenged Athletes Foundation in San Diego in 2018.

Vogel adds, “Dyson give Brandon a sense of home and stability that he takes with him wherever he goes. It’s almost as if Dyson heals Brandon in a certain way with positivity and love. He is a big yellow, cuddly dog and when he clomps into a room, everyone gets excited and smiles.”

A New Lease on Life

Vogel and Holiday have been together since June 2013, – four months after Dyson came on the scene – and lived together since 2015. “Having a partner with a service dog,” she adds, “requires some adjusting. We are not just two people. We are always two people and Dyson. While we consider all of our dogs family members, there’s something unique about having a dog that goes everywhere with you.”

The couple has three other dogs – Lucy, 7, a [German Shepherd](#) mix; Valor, and Kiko, 3-year-old [Belgian Malinois](#). Vogel feeds and plays with all of them daily. “She’s incredible,” Holiday emphasizes. “She deserves mega credit for keeping this pack upbeat and moving forward.”



Holiday and Dyson get in some face time after a sprint kayak workout. Photo courtesy Caroline Twohill Photography.

While some medicines have proven ineffective for Holiday, Dyson has proven the perfect prescription. “My increase in activity comes from the confidence of having Dyson alongside. If there are bad days, Dyson makes those bearable. Dyson is intuitive and can sense when I am in pain or having issues with mobility. There are times when I have been fatigued and struggling to get out of bed, Dyson would tap

me in the face with his paw and make a sound, which meant, 'Get out of bed, Dad.' That's pretty good therapeutic medicine, isn't it?"

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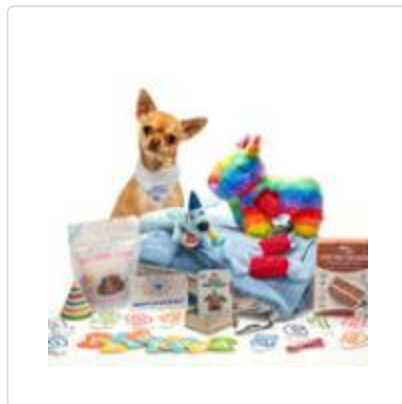
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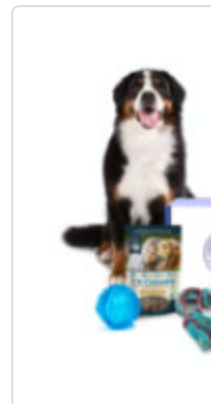
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