

Riona & Fearghas' Story

Introducing Kelly Robinson and her two Mastiffs, who suffer with Epilepsy and their dog Killian who also watches over them



I have tried often to write about what life is like with two epileptic Mastiffs, but quite often the tears take over and I need a break. The ups and downs are difficult, but I wouldn't give them up for anything. Riona and Fearghas have taught me more about life than the forty four years leading up to their diagnoses. The tattoo of their names and a purple ribbon on my forearm will be there forever as they will always live in my heart.

It's been almost two years, but it seems like yesterday. It's part of my life that I wish I could forget, but would never give up. Canine Epilepsy is something you never hear of, but something that becomes a part of you when it enters your home.

It was the morning after the New England Patriot's lost the 2012 Super Bowl. My twenty one month old, beautiful, brindle girl woke me up with her head jerking back and forth like a sprinkler head and a very distant stare. I woke my husband with my questions, "what are you doing baby girl?" Just then, Riona, a 170 lb Mastiff, flopped over and started paddling violently as if she were dreaming but much worse. The puppy is safe in his crate but her sister is jumping in my lap scared of her sister's fit. Thankfully my husband kept her from falling off the bed and supported her head as the minute and a half seemed like an hour.

When she appeared to return to us, we were all ready on the phone with the vet's office. "Just bring her up" they told us and off we went. My gut knew where we were headed and it was my worst nightmare coming true. The receptionists and vet techs are hugging me upon our arrival as the look of fear on my face was overwhelming. Dr. Cyn looked her all over and did blood work, but nothing was coming back wrong. We knew she had a torn cruciate ligament and were scheduled to see a surgeon that day, but had cancelled when we awoke the way we did. Dr. Cyn gave us a bunch of options and we chose to try

to get her into Tuft's to see Orthopedics and Neurology at once. There was no way I was going to knock her out for her knee until I knew what caused this. We scheduled everything for the following Wednesday. We'll be okay until then I told myself...well, almost. Tuesday night, the night before her two consults, she had another. Eight days from her first and just as violent...morning can't come soon enough.

I express my concerns about anesthetizing her with what's going on and we all agree that she needs an MRI. Everyone goes out of their way to schedule everything at once so we're not putting her out more than once. She will have an MRI, and then go directly into TPLO surgery, but we have to leave her overnight and her procedures will start first thing in the morning. I know it's the right thing to do, but just can't stop crying. We leave her but I make my husband promise to go visit her during his overnight shift. It's a very long night and an even longer day even with the phone updates. Finally I can go see her. She's made it through everything fine. MRI showed nothing and she now has a metal plate in her knee. Nine weeks in an xpen set up in our bedroom as she's not allowed to do anything but "business" outside. My little fighter is going to be okay.

We've started Keppra two times a day to see if we can control the seizures and we do, for a time...As we progress into this epileptic journey, Riona starts to have cluster seizures and Zonisamide is added. Cluster seizures are absolutely the scariest thing I have ever witnessed in my life. My poor girl...don't cry in front of her. Killian and Fearghas don't know what to do. In August we establish a "cluster buster" protocol, please make this better. We just want our girl to be better.

Saturday morning of Labor Day weekend 2012. The Mastiff puppy that was safe in his crate when Riona experienced her first seizure is awake and panting. Fearghas, who's too big for his crate now, sounds like he's all out of breath. We get up to look at him and he's lying in a pool of drool and shying away from us like he can't see us. We get him outside and he's acting totally bizarre. Running away from us and incredibly anxious. Not at all his normal loving behavior. My husband gets him close enough to start checking his abdomen and it's rock hard. We call Dr. Brian, our vet. I'm sorry it's seven in the morning, but after our description we all agree that baby Fearghas is bloating. Brian tells us to get him to Tuft's ASAP. I'll stay home with Riona to give her pills, my husband gets him in the truck and off they go. I call my cousin who works at Tuft's to warn them that Fearghas is on his way and we think he's bloating. She has the E.R. ready for him as he arrives. Riona and Killian know I'm crying and I tell them that their baby brother is going to be okay. We got him there in time, now I pray that my crying doesn't trigger a seizure for Riona.

My husband waits for the ER doctor. She finally emerges to tell him that she has good news! Fearghas isn't bloating...he's having seizures! My husband is devastated and the doctor tries to explain that it won't cost us all the money for surgery, but my husband tells her we have one Epileptic mastiff all ready...now we have two. They do tests and blood work just to confirm, but Fearghas too is diagnosed with Idiopathic Epilepsy.

Riona's neurologist is now involved with Fearghas and calls every few hours to let us know how he's doing. More seizures, he can't come home today, but we can visit. Poor Fearghas's face is twitching and at times acts as if he can't see us. His panting and drool cause puddles in his kennel. I cry all the way home so I get it out before Riona and Killian can see me. The next morning, more seizures, he can't come home today. The visit is the same and the nurses console us saying how sweet he is. The doctor tells me if Fearghas can make it twelve hours without a seizure, he'll be able to come home, so we wait another night. On the third morning, Dr. F calls to tell us he had another at 8 am, but he's getting very scared and uncooperative, so he wants him to come home but only if he can make it until 6 pm without one. My husband and I plan to give Riona her 3pm meds, then go to the hospital and stay with Fearghas, hoping our presence will calm him and keep him seizure free until 6.

The nurses let us take him outside to hopefully relax. His pills are done so one nurse comes looking for us. She was born in Ireland and has fallen in love with Fearghas. She gives him his pills and tells me how handsome he is and that he has human eyes. She remembers Riona being in ICU too with their unique Irish names. Dr. F comes out to see us and gives us the okay to go home with him, giving us the same meds that Riona is on but with the addition of pheno.

We would soon learn about the side effects of pheno. His balance is horrible, he looks like he's been drinking and he drags his front paws. He can't run without falling over and we are devastated about where our once happy go lucky Fearghas has gone. I keep reassuring my husband that it's only temporary, I've read about this on the Epil K9 list and he's going to get through it...but will he?

He does get through it about the same time beautiful Riona has pheno added to her Keppra and Zonisamide. It's the end of September 2012 and Riona had her second TPLO surgery on August 3rd, so she is still restricted to an xpen. It's early afternoon and I hear her pen rattle as I come out of the bathroom, oh no, I can't get in there fast enough...the monster is here. Our neurologist has us call whenever she has a seizure, so we call. By the time he calls back, we're on our fourth seizure. We're following our "cluster buster" protocol, and he tells us if she has another, to bring her in. It happens again. We get her loaded into the truck and while I run back inside to grab my bag, another one in the truck. I'm crying, my husband is crying asking if we should just put her down. Two more on the ride and we finally make it into the ER. They walk us right into a room when the ninth one hits. Dr. F is there watching and they bring the gurney in to take her to ICU. He goes off with her, now what do we do? He returns to tell us she's fine, she is on IVs and they're going to keep her. We ask about quality of life and should we just put her down? He tells us that watching her is very emotional, but she will be fine. We have plenty of med options and we're going to get through this. We appreciate his calming effect, but my emotions just let go.

We rush home to make sure Killian and Fearghas are okay, please Fearghas be okay! We both feel like we've been hit by a truck. She's fought to get through her knee surgery, now with adding pheno, how will she walk? We kept a harness on her for a long time so we could help her walk and catch her if she started to fall. The side effects lasted about as long as they did with Fearghas, three to four weeks that felt like years.

Riona's struggles with Epilepsy continue. She's a fighter and won't lose to her clusters. In January we added a fourth medication and she made it 39 days with no seizures. We always hope to break her record!

Fearghas has experienced focal seizures and no grand mals yet. He does really well but will continue to take meds five times a day for the rest of his life just like his sister.

Having had two mastiffs that lived to eleven and twelve, this disturbing diagnosis creates the constant fear of losing our babies very young. They are so sweet, everyone loves them! As big and intimidating as they would appear, there's nothing more opposite. Riona visits with an 86 year old man who has Alzheimer's but always remembers her. Her gentleness makes everyone love her. Fearghas is shy, but once he's comfortable, his silly, goofy, behaviors can't help but make you laugh. Mastiffs are true "gentle giants" even Epileptic ones.

Their disease doesn't change them. They love to play, wrestle, run, and move the furniture. They love to have visitors because everyone that comes over, comes to see them of course. They've learned what daddy's alarm on his cell phone means, time for treats! Currently, Fearghas takes 24 and Riona 36 pills a

day, spread out at five different times. It's not medicine though, not to them...with meds comes treats! Bananas, pineapple, melon, cheese, pill pockets, it's always something they love!

We don't miss out because of their disease, we adapt to it. Friends understand and invite them because it's med time. They travel with us and their meds so that they're on time and never missed. They love to ride in "their" truck, they don't care! They have their own travel bag with all the necessities.

When the monster does rear its ugly head, it affects all of them. They get nervous if something goes wrong. Non-epi Boxer, Killian, always watches out for her brother and sister. After the monster visits, they wait for each other to feel up to playing tug of war and wrestling in the yard. They know when each other doesn't feel good and patience will get us through this battle! Best friends they are and wait they will do. It's always amazing to me the sensitivity and loyalty that dogs have as opposed to us humans.

To say we've learned a lot would be an understatement. We've learned all about epilepsy. Not that it helps, but we understand it better. We read everything we can in the hope that maybe we can make a difference in their lives. We've learned how short life can be, what's important, who our friends are, and to value what you have. We've learned that no matter how bad it gets, we make it! We've met wonderful people who truly care!

With this disease, comes an emotional rollercoaster ride. The crying isn't as frequent, but the emotions are still severe. The sheer panic of a seizure has subsided to "stay calm, they need me calm"...get their seizure log, get their meds, make sure you time how long it is, watch their head, and just talk gently and let them know we're here.

This isn't the education we expected when we brought home Riona and Fearghas (Beowulfs Wild Irish Rose and Beowulfs It's Five O'Clock Somewhere), but it's one we wouldn't give up now. With all the emotion comes knowing true, unconditional love.