

Everyday Hero

A true story of how a German Shepherd Dog named Nike helped save my life.

By Jill Haunold

It was the perfect morning to go for a short cross-country ski. My husband was at a ski race for the day. I dropped the two boys and their friends at the down-hill area and parking at the end of the area lot, skied off with Nike the German Shepherd Dog and Moxie Java the Parson Russell Terrier puppy. Nike is a veteran in the woods. She has gone on backpacking trips, been roped up to cross over swift rivers on logs and run with me skiing, bike riding and walking. She always stays right with me. Moxie Java being a puppy and a terrier, I had on a twenty-foot plastic line that zipped along easily behind her and did not readily tangle so that I could grab control if necessary. We were skiing on a grooming access road on the boundary of the ski area. It was soft but good for the skis even though there had been an additional two feet of snow two days before, bringing the total to a little over six feet of total snow depth. Therefore, there was no game milling around in this deep of snow and most rodents were fast asleep this time of year. And the groundhog had seen his shadow predicting six more weeks of winter.

I usually snowshoe this route but I wanted to get in condition to perhaps do some ski-journing with Nike. We headed off for what I thought would be about an hour ski. This is what I told the boys as I dropped them off. There was another storm predicted for that evening but now it was mostly sunny and spirits were high in both human and canine hearts.

We trudged about a mile mostly up hill and I was feeling pretty good. Although I was getting tired enough where I was about ready to turn around, I still had the same distance back as I had already come, albeit down hill. It was at that point, that I blinked and Moxie Java who had been just in front of me, vanished. I began by calling optimistically. No Moxie Java. Then less optimistically, I peered over the snow berm between the flat groomed road cut and the steep hillside below. And there she was about 30 feet down the embankment. She had easily been able to climb up the settled snow that had been pushed to the side by an early season plow and had, I suspect thinking that she could run on top of all the snow run down the other side and into trouble. Perhaps she tumbled, perhaps she swam in the snow using gravity a little, either way she was now far down the hill and stuck.

With making eye contact, I called to her see if she could get back up. She gave it her best and made headway of about 15 feet on the lower and less steep portion. Then my heart really sank when I realized that somehow the line that I had carefully put on her for safety, was now hanging up below her and would not permit her to come any further even if she could have waded through the quicksand like snow. I called her more frantically to see if she struggled if she could free the line. No luck.

My first attempt at going to her was to try and take a less direct approach by side stepping with my skis at a less steep angle. Unfortunately, these were very narrow skis meant for skiing in set groomed tracks and had very little float in this depth of snow. I was kicking myself for not having at least carried snowshoes with me. Neither the rescue attempt nor the regret got us anywhere.

Then thinking I could somehow tamp down the snow with my ski and then be able to walk more or less right down to Moxie Java, I took off my skis and began thumping the snow with one of them. Not only did this not work, it was stupid. And I watched helplessly as the ski slipped out of my hand, zipping past Moxie Java by ten feet at least hitting a tree and not going completely out of sight, and fortunately coming to rest mostly buried, almost exactly in Moxie Java's original trajectory. Things were quickly going from bad to worse.

My next bad idea was to send Nike down after her, thinking that she would make a track down to Moxie Java that both could follow back up. Nike willing tried to oblige and being much bigger and heavier than Moxie was quickly swallowed by snow. Realizing immediately that she was in trouble, Nike turned and tried to get back up. Clearly panicking, she began wildly pawing at the snow trying to climb out like a drowning victim. I lay over the embankment spreading my weight out and grabbing her collar, hauled her back out and up. I guess that is one of those examples of super human strength in an adrenaline situation. At home, I can barely lift a forty-pound bag of dog food, much less haul a struggling 70 pound dog straight up out of deep snow while lying down.

I was by now running out of ideas and Moxie was still 20 feet below us. During all of these efforts, I had been doing one other thing. I was trying to decide if there was any way that I could leave Moxie Java to get back to the car, drive the four miles round trip to the cabin to get my snowshoes and then climb back up the mountain to free her. I dismissed this idea several times on the same basis. If I left Moxie Java, she would try to follow me, with down being the path of least resistance she would likely get stuck even further down into the ravine where I could not find her ever, she would become easy prey, or both. I could not and would not risk this.

In the absence of snowshoes, I looked around to find something that would act like snowshoes and came upon the idea of tree branches. I began to break off as many tree branches as I could that had enough needles that could act as a floor to the deep snow. If I could just get closer to her perhaps I could lay on the branches spreading my weight over a larger surface area and crawl the 15 or so feet to Moxie Java. It was a good plan. It was my only plan. It was a plan that almost killed both of us.

I executed the idea with some swiftness. I lay out all of the branches and then mashed them down as best I could by leaning as far as possible. Then I gingerly put some weight on them. They held. I pushed a little further and was getting closer when everything

caved in. I was now in a worse situation than Moxie due to being heavier, two legged and up to my chest in snow.

I panicked just as Nike had. I struggled to get some purchase to climb out of what I was fast thinking was going to be my grave. The more I struggled, the more solid and deep the wall of snow I had to get out of became. This, I thought is exactly how a mildly bad situation becomes what people read about in the papers the next day and wonder how something like this could have happened and what on earth was this woman thinking.

I consciously had to calm myself. This however, led me to the realization that I had failed to tell anyone where I was going. Chris, my husband would not be back for at least six more hours. The boys would expect me in four but would probably not be concerned until well after dark. By then the storm would be here and even if the groomer were to go past, he or she would never see or hear me in the dark above the din of storm and machine. I quickly arrived at the conclusion that I was an absolute idiot, that this was a really stupid way to die and that they would find both Moxie Java and myself in a couple of days dead from exposure.

Looking up out of the hole as I considered all of these grim possibilities at once, I saw Nike. A half hour earlier she had herself been stuck in this same situation when I pulled her out. Now, she sat patiently on the other side of the cat track waiting for me to emerge. I called to her.

A little background information on Nike is probably in order at this point. Nike came to me at the age of two, to train for a couple of months and put some beginning obedience titles on. In return, I would someday get a puppy from one of her breedings. We did the training, she got her titles and I returned her to her owner and my good friend. And then I cried. Over the course of my 45 years, I had lived with many different breeds of dogs. But the dog I had always wanted and never had was a purebred German Shepherd Dog. A romantic at heart, I grew up with Rin Tin Tin and fell in love. My friends knew that I was upset about losing Nike and I got a call that evening with my friend saying she would be bringing Nike back and that she wanted me to keep her. Nike belonged with me.

I love this dog. That said, Nike is a bit of a spaz. She is a wiggle worm when petted and if excited she jumps, squirms and throws her weight around running over and into anything in the way. She is as we lovingly say, a bull in a china shop. Also, she has failed numerous obedience trials because she would not stay when told or much else for that matter.

So when I called her over to me, I had low expectations that she would first, come at all after already getting trapped once in the heavy snow and if she did, and second I did not think she would get close enough or hold still enough to allow me to grab her and be of help. She was going to have to come very close to the edge because I was now down about six feet below the surface of the road and am only a little over five feet tall. But I

was wrong. She walked over and getting as close to the edge as possible quietly lay down within my reach. Once I had hold of her collar I expected her to panic but she didn't. She just stayed. While I now had a glimmer of hope through being connected physically to my girl, this was not enough to get me out. I did not want to pull her in on top of me, nor was just holding on to her going to get me anywhere. She had to be an anchor. She had to set herself and actually resist my pulling her toward me. She stayed.

I still could not get purchase on the snow. I needed something else to reduce the pulling on Nike. And in order to get myself into this mess, I had earlier broken off all of the large tree branches that were immediately close but now would have provided the much needed leverage. But there were still a few left. I could barely reach out in an awkward triangle made more unstable by a shoulder that has tended to dislocate. Nike stayed like a rock. Not moving a muscle. Knowing I had to do something soon or the situation would collapse, I grabbed and heaved. Nike backed up just enough at the same time to assist the momentum. Not letting go of Nike, I was up far enough to crawl up and over the hump onto the road. Breathing hard, exhausted and wet, I realized that I had been down in the hole with only one mitten on and that my other hand was getting very cold. Nike stood watching me. I thanked her for saving my life.

Then, looking down, my relief was short lived when I saw that Moxie was still stuck. I was alive thanks to Nike but the original problem had not gone away, only the possibilities for a good outcome had disappeared and about two hours of time and energy had passed. Moxie Java had a coat on in addition to the line that was now causing most of the problem but even though remaining amazingly calm for a Parson Russell Terrier puppy of seven months, she was beginning to cry. Still afraid that she would try to go down the hill and get further away from any possibility of saving her, I kept calling and talking to her. She kept running back down to where the line was caught and running back up again, making a slightly packed path in the snow.

It was after one of those runs that I noticed she had been able to get just a little further up than previously. The line was loose. She still could not climb out of the hole she was in as it was at the steepest spot but she was no longer anchored in place.

I had one idea left. I still had my ski poles which were adjustable to about five feet. Even tied together however they were not long enough to reach Moxie Java and if they were, then what? I broke off the longest branch with the most foliage I could find and tied it to the end of the second ski pole. If Moxie Java could make just a little progress, and I could get the branch to her, it could provide her just enough purchase to give her some leverage.

I started calling her wildly and encouraging her to try. Keep in mind here that Moxie Java is just a baby terrier. They are not known for their obedience. But champion bred, she is exactly what she is supposed to be, a fit, thinking little hunting dog and especially in her case, lots of moxie. And she seemed to know that we had to work together to get her out. She struggled and made little forward progress. Then just a little.

Unfortunately, Moxie Java was up against the same problem I had encountered, each small amount up the hill, would make a wall that was just that much more difficult to

climb out of. I called more. She slowly worked her way the three to five feet to the branches. She had been struggling now for over two hours, which had not included the hike. I knew she would be getting too tired to keep trying if we did not get her out soon. I cheered for every inch up the hill. Moxie Java seemed to understand what she had to do.

She reached the branches attached to the ski poles. I had to leave it there long enough for her to get claws on, swearing at myself for always keeping her nails so short, then pulling gently enough that she could stay on them enough to make headway but keep from pulling it out from underneath her. Even with the branches she had to stand completely up right with just her front feet to claw her way up. Inch by inch she was coming toward me. Finally, within a body's length, I lay back over the placed that had collapsed under me just over a half hour earlier and leaning as far as I could, grabbed Moxie Java by the coat and hauled her up and out of danger.

I hugged her tight. Everything would be ok now. I was so proud of her. There are few puppies that would have had the mental and physical resources to do what she had just done. Finally able to look around and breath, I could not let myself be as tired as I felt. We still had to get back and my one ski was still resting 30 feet down the hill. Getting to it without snowshoes was out of the question. At first I thought to walk but in trying even the snow on the road was too soft. I simply sunk four or five inches with each footstep.

Truth be told, I am not much of a skier. I learned as an adult after moving west and while I try, I have never become any better than good enough to get down the hill. I am an active person but not a particularly talented one and have little in the way of finesse. But I had no choice. If I was going to make it back to the car, I had to make use of gravity. I tied Moxie Java to Nike and putting on my one ski, I used a bit of a skate board technique, something I have only watched my sons do but never tried, to ride one ski down the hill.

The gravity that was Moxie Java's enemy minutes ago was now our friend again. We made it to the car in good time. Good enough in fact that I had decided on the way down that I must go back for the other ski. Now that everything was fine again and we were all safe, I was beginning to feel foolish for losing the ski and getting into the entire mess to begin with. Asking myself such questions as why I had not tied Moxie Java to my waist? What was I thinking when I thought I could walk on tree branches? Why had I not told anyone where I would be going? Essentially I began considering all of the "what ifs" I had not had the luxury to indulge rumination over until now. I was not about to let that ski stay up there forever as a reminder of my own stupidity.

I packed Moxie Java safely away in her crate in the car, went home, got snowshoes and a shovel and drove back to the parking lot. Snowshoeing in was quite a bit easier than the skiing had been. I carried the one ski with me all the way so that I could use gravity once again on the return. Once there, my heart began to beat fast. This was stupid. It was about pride and we all know what happens to those with pride. Pride goeth before a fall

and all. And I still had not left a note at the cabin about where I was going. Now twice or more an idiot, I had to get that ski. But this time, I did think to post the remaining ski in the middle of the cat track so that someone might see it and think, "I wonder why there is a ski in the middle of the trail?" That and that Nike was still with me and would wait forever if she had to for someone to find me, dead or alive.

But aside from the post traumatic stress anxiety it was producing, getting the ski proved relatively easy. Because it was not alive and I now had the right equipment, I could side hill down a less steep path making steps as I went with the snowshoes. I snatched the ski, retraced my steps and was back up in less than 10 minutes. Relieved, I packed the snowshoes and shovel in my backpack, put on both skis and headed home to my little good girl Moxie Java along with one tired German Shepherd Dog; International Ch. Blaze vom Wilden Westen, BH, AD, RN, certified therapy dog, aka Nike, my hero.