



# Rommel's rarity

Rommel the Rottweiler began his life on 1 March 2000, oblivious to his impending rise to fame, but boasting a good strong German name to go with his breed's German heritage.

BY DR ALEX MELROSE

Rommel's little black-and-tan body seemed perfectly formed and he quickly started to grow, developing a large muscular frame. His father, a TV-commercial star, would have been proud of his strapping son.

All was going well until late in December 2004 when Rommel's lip pigment started changing from black to white. Being the 'fur kid' of Vanessa, a veterinary nurse at our clinic, plenty of possible explanations were investigated and many dollars spent finding answers. Allergic skin conditions, dietary insufficiency and auto-immune diseases were systematically ruled out, and as the testing extended so did the spread of his white spots. They grew in size and ran together to become splotches. Finally a diagnosis of vitiligo was made. It's the so-called 'Michael Jackson disease' that afflicts some people and apparently a certain line of Rottweilers, particularly in the United States.

The condition is a genetic abnormality where pigment-producing melanocytes in the skin cease to function causing it to whiten. It is exceptionally rare, even in those carrying the gene, and is possibly triggered by some sort of auto-immune dysfunction. Fortunately, it isn't usually linked to anything more sinister for those afflicted, and can sometimes reverse itself. Best of all, it shouldn't shorten Rommel's lifespan and he copes extremely well with all the extra attention vitiligo brings with it.

As these pigment changes spread, they left Rommel's eyelids without sun protection, and conjunctivitis resulted from all the UV exposure we get outdoors here in New Zealand. Doggles came to the rescue and he was fitted with a very stylish and masculine pair of dog goggles for those summer trips to the park or beach, which he loves.

Early in 2005 Rommel ran across the street to welcome a

doggie pal and instead was greeted with sudden impact from a fast-moving vehicle. His front right limb was shattered into many large pieces and a multitude of smaller fragments – a Humpty Dumpty of a break. Extensive efforts by our team and the orthopaedic specialists at the Veterinary Specialist Group finally pulled everything back together again. However, Rommel's bones were refusing to heal normally and this was confirmed on his progress X-rays.

We discovered, through further research, a link between vitiligo and disturbances in the healing process. So off to the hyperbaric chamber he went. This is a small, specially-designed metal cage where greater pressures can be applied to the internal atmosphere, forcing up the oxygen levels carried around in the patient's bloodstream. It's a mini version of the chambers initially used by navy divers to recover from the bends.

Ten treatments that saturated him with high levels of oxygen did the job, carrying extra oxygen and nutrients to the damaged area and kick-starting the reunification of his bony tissues. Rommel made a full recovery and the only sign of his injury is a slight limp, which occurs if he gets over excited and throws his 50kg weight around!

As Rommel's whiteness spread so did his fame. Being the only Rottie with vitiligo in New Zealand he's been kept busy with newspaper and television interviews. Today Rommel ignores the comments of 'Wow. How old is he?' and has relaxed into stardom and middle age. He has an important role here at the clinic – practising his sleeping talents. Considering all the excitement, drama and extensive bills his owner has had to deal with, she's looking forward to a more sedate second half of Rommel's life!

Photos by Vanessa Townsend-Paley

