

Couple welcomes home cloned dog

January 28 2009, By Elinor J. Brecher

Sir Lancelot Encore spent his first Florida night in the master bedroom - along with nine other dogs, various cats and two humans - oblivious to the sensation he had caused earlier Monday.

The 10-week-old golden Labrador retriever is a clone, created in South Korea by a California biotech firm from the DNA of the first Sir Lancelot: beloved pet of Ed and Nina Otto of Boca Raton, Fla.

The original "Lancy" died, at age 11, in January 2008.

A celebrity from the moment he bounded off an American Airlines flight Monday night at Miami International Airport, Lancy redux "very quickly integrated into the menagerie and held his own," said Lou Hawthorne, CEO of BioArts, the firm that auctioned off five dog-cloning procedures last July.

The Ottos spent \$155,000 to win the second-round auction.

"He's a spunky little critter," Hawthorne said. "He was nipping and stealing things."

By Tuesday morning, Regis and Kelly and the BBC were clamoring for the inquisitive, 17-pound bundle of energy. The Ottos say he is the first single-birth, commercially cloned puppy in the United States.

They already have a lot of dogs: Roxanne, Scarlett and Cadbury - the yellow Labradors - Henry, Hayley, Cassidy and Oliver - the Cavalier

King Charles spaniels - Zoe the bichon frise and Cartier, the teacup Yorkie.

They also have 10 cats, six sheep and four parrots. But with 12 acres in West Boca, there's always room for one more. So when the chance came to duplicate Lancelot, there was no hesitation.

He was just special, said Nina Otto, 66.

"He was a human dog," said Ed, 79. "He read your emotions. He knew when to be with you and when to leave you alone. And he was the 'crew chief'" of the dog population, keeping everyone in line.

"He could understand English and read hand signals."

Ed Otto calls himself a "serial entrepreneur." His father, the late Edward Otto, cofounded both NASCAR and the Orange Bowl where, in the 1930s, he staged motorcycle races.

Money wasn't an issue when they heard about the auction. Indeed, the Ottos had cryogenically banked DNA samples from their beloved Lancelot five years earlier, hoping that some day they would be able to do what they finally did.

BioArts teamed with Dr. Hwang Woo-suk, a scientist with South Korea's Sooam Biotech Research Foundation, to produce the dog.

Hwang, a controversial figure, lost his research professorship at Seoul National University in 2004 after fraudulently claiming he had cloned human embryos and stem cells.

He was, however, involved in creating an Afghan hound clone the next year.

To create Lancelot Encore, Woo-suk took an egg from what Hawthorne called "an indigenous Korean dog" resembling a bloodhound, replaced the egg's innards with the late Lancelot's DNA, then implanted the egg in a second Korean dog.

The procedure failed once, then succeeded, Hawthorne said. Two months later, Lancelot Encore was born, weighing 1.3 pounds.

The Ottos are certain he is the real deal. They say they trust Hawthorne, whom they have known for several years, since he ran a BioArts predecessor called Genetic Savings & Clone.

Were there any doubt, Nina Otto said, "we could have the puppy's DNA checked. But I believe in people."

The Humane Society of the United States lambastes pet cloning as "fraught with animal suffering and false promises ... There is no replacing a beloved companion."

Calling the practice "disreputable," the animal-welfare organization insists that "cloning cannot replicate an animal's uniqueness. Cloning can only replicate the pet's genetics, which influence but do not determine his physical attributes or personality."

It is unclear whether little Lancy's temperament will resemble his predecessor's, but Hawthorne said that Tuesday morning, "the little rascal" seemed to offer his own form of proof ... against Nina Otto's leg.

The late Lancelot "was sexually very aggressive," Hawthorne said.

He expects the puppy to be "completely fertile," able to father pups of his own. He also should have a normal life span: 12 to 13 years.

"After Dolly in 1996" - the world's first cloned animal, a sheep - "concern was raised about life span because she died in middle age," Hawthorne said. "But she was put down because of a standard sheep disease. There was no indication she had aged prematurely."

He does not expect the cost of dog cloning to fall much because "it's so much trouble."

The concept has critics, many of whom question the ethics of spending so much money on custom-designed dogs at a time when U.S. shelters kill an estimated 3 million to 4 million unwanted pets annually.

"We have to euthanize more than 20,000 a year who would have made great pets," said Dr. Sara Pizano, who heads Miami-Dade County's Animal Services Department.

"For \$155,000, we could do spays and neuters for six months."

But the Ottos make no apologies for wanting a do-over with Lancy.

"I give a lot of money to the Tri-County Humane Society in Palm Beach County," Ed Otto said.

Indeed, said the no-kill shelter's founder and CEO, Jeannette Christos, the Ottos have given her shelter almost twice what their new puppy cost.

"When the new building goes up, their name will be on parts of it," she said. Ed "has a big plaque in our lobby, and he bought us a new van."

While the shelter is overflowing with 375 adoptable pets, "everyone has to make their own decision," she added. "He loved that dog so much. He's a great supporter and does love animals."

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