Goodbye, old friend

By Dan O'Sullivan
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Friends may come and go, but family is a part of you forever.

We lost a member of the bass fishing family on Monday when Barkley, the trusty yellow lab companion of Elite Series pro Mark Menendez passed away.

To those who followed the sport closely, Barkley was a fixture on the tour, as he could always be found at the side of his "partner" as the Paduah, Ky., angler most frequently referred to him.

Barkley first became known to the public when he accompanied Menendez at a 2003 tour event at Eufaula, Ala. He then became famous to the greater bass fishing community when he made an appearance at the 2003 Bassmaster Classic on the Louisiana Delta when Menendez grabbed the Day 1 lead.

Throughout his life, Barkley was a frequent visitor to BASS events throughout the country, and wherever fans would find Menendez, Barkley was sure to be nearby.

While ever present in the public eye, Barkley was more than a showpiece to Menendez, his wife, Donna, and children, Caroline and Max; he was a family member.

"I got him on Valentine's Day in 2001," said Menendez. "We bonded instantly. It was a good thing, too, because I was about to need a friend in the biggest way." Menendez would go through a series of difficult personal issues that left him struggling to find joy in his life; Barkley became the companion that helped get him through a two-year period that he called his dark time.

"Barkley was my only friend, the only thing I could count on, including myself," Menendez said of his oldest friend. "He gave me the unconditional love and support that helped me get through my down times. It helped me find it within myself to keep going, to learn to compete again, and to be ready to meet my wife Donna — without Barkley, I wouldn't have been ready for her."

Over the years, as the Menendez family grew, Barkley welcomed each member with the joy and warmth he was known for. "He accepted Donna immediately, and he made her feel welcome at our home, when she was scared of bigger dogs from being bitten as a child," Menendez explained. "When Caroline and Max came along, he became their protector, following them around the house keeping watch over them."

Menendez described his companion for the past eight years as a kind, loving animal who was gentle, even allowing the family's new Maltese puppy Scooter to lay down and snuggle with him as they slept. "Barkley loved everyone; he greeted every woman and child with a little kiss," he said. "He gave me more than I ever gave him, he did with everyone. I may have rescued him from a shelter, but now that I look at it, he rescued me."
Had he one more minute to talk to his friend, Menendez would simply hug his companion, his oldest friend and say a few words, "I would tell him I loved him, but ultimately, all I could say would be thank you; his love and friendship was a gift I didn't deserve."