

WHY HAVE ROAD TRIALS?

- Lorie McCrone

As all Dalmatians owners know, Dalmatians are unique! It is not just because they are the only breed to have such a distinctive spotting pattern on their coat; it is also because of their unprecedented affinity to horses.

Unless a dog breed was specifically developed after the advent of the motor vehicle, all dogs would have had interaction with horses at some time during their development stages. But the Dalmatian is the *only* breed to be developed, that is instinctively associated with horses. Having spent a large amount of time at a local stable, I come in contact with a wide variety of dog breeds that hang out at the barn and have had the opportunity to observe their relationship with the horses. They all seem to get along with the horse, but not in the same way as the Dalmatian.

Take, for instance, the Border collie named Tipper. Highly intelligent and well behaved at the barn, and he has a special love of the horses. Tipper loves to herd them. While this behavior may be an asset when one is trying to get the horses down from a hilly pasture, it is definitely not an advantage when you are trail riding. His constant nips at the heels of the horses caused several of them to bolt, while the riders were on board. This herding trait is part of the BC's personality and would be perfectly acceptable in a pasture full of sheep, but Tipper does not accompany his owner on trial rides.

Next we have Willow the Rottweiler. While Willow is not the least bit interested in herding the horses, she does exhibit "guarding" behavior when her mounted owner encounters another rider on the trail. Her deep growls warn other riders and dogs to stay from them and if they venture to close I have no doubt Willow would attack. Rotties were originally developed to protect the property, or horses, of their owner and so Willow is only doing what generations of breeding has programmed her to do. But Willow stays home when her owner goes for a trail ride. The chance that she may hurt someone is too great a risk.

Then there is the friendly Labrador, Hershey. This stocky, well muscled, thickly coated dog loves everyone and all the creatures at the stable. He would gladly lick every horse that allowed him the opportunity. He has no desire to herd them, or guard them, he simply wants to be next to his owner and if that means being close to the horses too, so be it. But Hershey's body style and coat were developed to allow him to stand for long periods of time in cold water, and to have the muscle power to retrieve large ducks and geese. It is not conducive to running 6 or 8 or even 12 miles next to a horse in high heat and humidity. His owner knows this Labrador would be prone to heat exhaustion when exercising under these weather conditions or when practicing endurance (long distance) riding. So, Hershey does not accompany his owner when he trail rides.

Finally, there is the Jack Russell (Parsons) Terrier, Max. His relationship to the horse is more of a symbiotic one than that of the other breeds of dogs. Since horses have been known to drop a few grains of feed while having their meals, mice, rats and moles become unwelcome guests at the barn. But Max is there to take care of the problem. He loves to kill these pests. Max frequently stays in and around the stalls where the horses hang out. But he is not there to specifically make friends with the horses; he is there to take advantage of the opportunity to do what he has been bred to do, get rid of vermin. Max has no interest in running next to the horse when his owner goes out on a trial ride. He stays at the barn to watch for the small critters he loves to hunt.

Kellie is the only Dalmatian at the stable and the only dog that *always* accompanies her owner (me) on trial rides.

So, while many breeds of dogs do have contact and interaction with the horse, it is only the Dalmatian that holds the unique spot of being the one breed that everyone associates with horses. They alone, among all the breeds of the world, are called "Coach Dogs". So what qualities do Dals have that make this association so perfect?

First it is body style. At the standard 20-24 inches in height, Dalmatians are well muscled and perfectly proportioned to run for 12 – 25 miles, yet svelte enough to handle extreme temperatures. Next, their coat is not too thick, dries quickly when saturated, and is easily cleaned when covered in mud or snow. The spots are an advantage. In cold weather the black/liver spots draw in heat and in warm weather the white hairs reflects the

heat helping the dog to maintain a more constant temperature than a solid colored dog. Their foot pads are thick and tough enough to handle rough terrain and their ground covering, energy conserving gait allows for long distance endurance.

Finally, their even tempered, intelligent personality encourages a close relationship with the horse and rider. Dalmatians are not fixated on herding, guarding or hunting. Their purpose is to run along side a mounted rider (or coach), pay attention to position of the horse, and to follow the directions of the rider.

As I train Kellie for competition at upcoming Road Trials, these qualities become very evident. I never fear that she will suddenly get the urge to nip at the horse heels, or stand her ground in defense, or decide to suddenly run back to the barn to chase after a stray rodent. Equally important, I know because of her conditioning, she will not collapse from heat exhaustion nor chose to ignore my commands to remain next to my horse. The reason for this is her in-born natural desire to remain near me and the horse.

Road Trials serve to perpetuate these natural instincts found in this breed, and highlights the qualities of good health, good breeding and intelligence so necessary for success in this venue. These important breed qualities are showcased in Road Trial competitions and are proof that this breed still has, and will continue to have, those genetic qualities that uniquely make it a Dalmatian.

So, why have Road Trials? Because that is what a Dalmatian is all about!



Lorie, on her horse Tango, is accompanied by her Dalmation Storm. (Note: Storm is in a perfect hock position.)