

# LIVING WITH THE SCOTTISH DEERHOUND

By Betty L. Stephenson, DVM



Photo courtesy of Robin Pelfrey.

**A**re Scottish Deerhounds for everybody? Of course not—no breed is. That's the reason we have purebred dogs: so everyone can find the breed that's right for him or her. My mentor used to say that Deerhounds would never be very popular because they weren't the "most" anything: not the biggest, not the tallest, nor the fastest nor the most elegant. But for those of us who love them, they are everything.

The Deerhound was used for deerstalking in the days before reliable firearms, a sport for the wealthier folk who hunted for pleasure more than necessity. Two or three Deerhounds were taken along on leash as hunters walked on foot to find the

big Scottish red deer, akin to our gigantic elk. Once located, the stalk to get close enough to slip the dogs commenced, and when that was achieved, the dogs gave chase by sight. Common lore suggests that if the deer wasn't caught within the first two minutes, it would likely escape—Deerhounds are sprinters, not endurance hounds—although there are tales as well of marathon chases through the highlands. According to George Cupples, who wrote *Scotch Deerhounds and Their Masters* in 1894, the Deerhound is the most biddable of the sighthound breeds, with some individuals capable of being called off the kill. If the deer wasn't killed by the fall, the job of the dogs was to hold it til the hunters could arrive and dispatch it. When firearms improved, the skills of the

Scottish Deerhound became obsolete and he has been relegated to the role of companion and show dog in more recent times.

Deerhounds are very people oriented and do not do well as kennel dogs. They are very attached to their human families and will become fat, lazy couch potatoes if allowed once they've grown out of their rambunctious (and often destructive) youth. But a fat, out-of-shape Deerhound is likely to suffer from a variety of health problems, much like their owners, and in order to reach their potential and be healthy members of the family, they need exercise—and a lot of the right kind of it. That means free running on open ground, something pretty hard to provide in this era of urban life. There's nothing you can do on foot that your well-conditioned





*Photo courtesy of David Rice.*

Deerhound can't keep up with: running, hiking, horseback riding—there are even people who bicycle with their Deerhounds, though I believe the risks of that kind of exercise might outweigh the benefits. Mature Deerhounds are quiet and dignified most of the time. But they can be very silly indeed if they want to be. Average life expectancy is nine, though Deerhounds of 11 or 12 are fairly common.

Showing Deerhounds in conformation is what most owners do, and in this breed, an owner/handler can still finish a good dog if s/he puts some effort into training and grooming. There are quite a few who go on beyond the Classes to try their luck in the Group Ring, and some have been quite successful. Since a Scottish Deerhound won Best In Show at Westminster a few years ago, Deerhounds have been taken more seriously in the Groups.

There's a sport for sighthounds called Lure Coursing, and for the ones willing to play that game, there's just nothing like it. Three Deerhounds wearing colored blankets so the judges can tell them apart are slipped on a lure of white plastic bags that tear around a field on a cord and pulleys, zigging and zagging to simulate the chase of the hare, and they're judged on speed, agility, endurance, follow and enthusiasm. Probably as many Deerhounds won't play the game as will, but the ones who will have a grand old time, and there's nothing like watching your Deerhound have the time of his life running with others of his ilk, and "killing" the lure in the end.

So if your Deerhound won't chase the lure, what else can you do with him? I do obedience with mine. There are those



*Photo courtesy of Steve Surfman.*

who say it's beneath the dignity of a Deerhound to do obedience work, but when you find what motivates your dog, you can get him to enjoy whatever you enjoy doing. Putting obedience titles on your dog creates a bond between you that is like nothing else. Your dog learns what he can do to please you, earn a treat, or make you play a game with him, and earning the titles gives you the motivation to keep on working with your dog. While the retrieving and marking targets required in the advanced obedience classes are skills that sighthounds are not bred for, they can certainly learn those behaviors easily if you know what motivates them. Food, praise and toys, combined with a happy outlook toward what you're doing makes the game fun.

Agility is also a sport that Deerhounds can do, and there are a few people who've put advanced Agility titles on their dogs. The tunnels are very small for giant breeds and the weave poles difficult for long-



*Photo courtesy of Dan Gauss.*

bodied dogs, making the sport a very different one than for the smaller breeds, but a Deerhound is nothing if not agile, and the running, climbing and jumping are fun for them.

Tracking? Dr. Deborah Cutter has put TDX (Tracking Dog Excellent) titles on more than one Deerhound, in addition to conformation championships, UDXs (Utility Dog Excellent), Field Championships, and Agility Excellent titles. Not always on the same dog, as each has talents and abilities of his or her own, but more than once—it CAN be done!

I picked Ra almost from day one from my litter born on Thanksgiving Day 2010. Before she was out of the whelping box she was following a treat to sit, down and stand on command. By the time she was eight weeks old, she was chasing the lure toy, while her sister Torrie just chased her. As she matured, food became less of a motivator for her and praise and





Photo courtesy of Steve Surfman.

happy talk were the things that lit up her face and gave her beautiful heeling attention—she had her CD (obedience Companion Dog) and SC (Lure Coursing Senior Courser) titles by the time she was two. She picked up two five point conformation majors, too, finishing her Dual Championship this summer. She made her Open Obedience debut at our National Specialty in Lexington, VA in April, where she won Best in Meet Straight Racing, Obedience High in Trial and Best in Field in AKC lure coursing, and All Around Hound. She's now DC Kyleakin Lahar CD SC FCH VC.

Can Deerhounds do it all? You bet they can! Like everything else worth doing, it takes commitment and work on your part and a Deerhound that's willing to play along. It's not often you get everything

in the same dog, but each one has unique aptitudes. Many excel as Therapy Dogs, and one Deerhounder does Freestyle with her Deerhound. If many seem too lazy to tackle work of any kind, I guess that's not so unlike the human side of our world. I love a dog that's ok with lying around all day if that's what I want to do. But like a lot of folks, many (if not most) Deerhounds will become overweight and out of shape, or else eat poorly and become thin if allowed to lie around all day. Walking or hiking with your dogs is essential to keep their minds and bodies well and strong. An energetic youngster that's under-exercised (and that might mean up to three or four years old) might chew up your shoes, surf your counters (and eat your lunch), destroy all the dog beds or go on a tear in your living room, leaping over the furniture in a

mad dash from one room to the next. Most enjoy standing with their front feet on your shoulders so they can lick your face or nibble your nose. They're not very good as watchdogs, as they only seem to bark at each other in play.

Versatility is important to me, especially conformation and running events to maintain the function of the breed, but trainability, too, as our dogs have to live in society with us and need to be biddable. While Deerhounds are naturally fairly well-behaved, they also have keen senses of humor and some are practical jokers. They need some discipline. It's not above a Deerhound to run to the door as if to say, 'I need to go out!', and when you get up to open the door, wheel around, race to your place on the couch, and take it! ■

## BIO

*Betty L. Stephenson, DVM, has had dogs all her life and trained her first Beagle at ten years old in obedience. She got her first Deerhound in 1988. Her second became her first Utility Dog, first show dog and Champion, and the breed's first individual to achieve both titles. That Deerhound also became the foundation bitch for Kyleakin, CH Jubalhil Queen Mor o'Dhu Mohr UD. Betty has bred three more Champion Utility Dogs, many other obedience and a few Agility titled Deerhounds, 30 Breed Champions, and 6 Dual Champions.*

*Betty sold her small animal practice in Bowling Green, KY, in 2009 and is semi-retired, living off-grid in a solar home on 150 remote acres in Kentucky's Edmonson County with four horses, eight chickens, and nine Scottish Deerhounds ranging in age from one year old to eleven and a half.*



Photo courtesy of Camilla Colleen.