Working Dog notes at end

When I’m out walking with Brackie lots of people admire him and ask questions such as:

“What breed is he?” “Is he a sort of setter?” “Or a cross with a black lab?” “How old is he?” “Does he like the water.” “What’s he like with children?” “How do you keep his coat so shiny?”

I don’t mind. I like talking about dogs. The only question that strikes me on the raw is: “Do you show him or is he *just* a pet?”

After that the conversation goes something like this:

“No, I don’t show him. He’s a working dog.”

“A working dog? What does he do?”

“His job is to be with me 24 hours a day.”

“And that’s work?”

“Yes it is. Constant work.”

Am I merely being defensive? Do I want to claim more than is justified simply because I don’t like the put-down inherent in ‘just a pet?’ Certainly I hate the word ’pet’ whoever speaks it. And I don’t find ’companion,’ much better, a term many people use an alternative. The one is possessively patronising : the other sounds like something for which rich old ladies pay heaps of money. And I do think that Brackie’s being with me constantly has, for him, many of the characteristics of work.

**Always on the job**

Whatever the argument about words, Brackie *is* continuously doing his job. He’s lying beside me as I write this. Writing is an on-your-own task so I like having Brackie here.

Sometimes he lies on his bean bag bed or outside on the music room steps but wherever he is, all day he guards the front gates – by sound rather than by sight. At the slightest click of the latch he’s into alert mode. And if I don’t come he rushes in to get me before darting out again.

At night, as if on permanent guard, he lies on his bean bag just inside the entrance of our bedroom. In the morning, if I stay in bed too long, Brackie nuzzles me awake. Does he know the time? Probably he simply wants the early morning biscuit he gets when I’ve made my coffee. After biscuit and coffee I let Brackie out the gate and he collects the neighbour’s paper from the top of the drive, drops it outside their house and then goes back for ours.

Brackie is attuned to the patterns of life in our household. When the phone rings and we’re not together he comes and gets me and makes a fuss if I don’t come immediately. Most of the day, though, he’s close nearby. If I look in a bedroom drawer for a warm jersey he looks too. If I go outside to hang the clothes on the washing line he comes as well.

**Where’s the fun?**

I suppose this idea of thinking of one’s dog as ‘working’ sounds a bit heavy, serious and ponderous. Where’s the fun, the play, the rolling and gambolling and the being friends? They are still all there. In fact they are built in – integrated. When I or my wife is gardening and Brackie comes to join us , he brings a ball so that gardening is punctuated by ball throwing. He is a retriever after all. And there are always leans and cuddles. He likes to touch and be touched. So he leans on you. He likes to lick too. You wouldn’t have a flatcoat if you didn’t like to be licked.

Training has been part of this integrated life. Brackie is an enthusiast. He wants to be first through the door, first to greet someone, and he wants to rush at his food. ‘Wait’ has become his most important control command. I use the ‘wait’ command many times a day. Other commands such as ‘this way’ and ’upupupupupupupupupupup’ (for jumping up into something) he has just picked up as we’ve gone along. And learning to do tricks has just been part of play. Tricks, such as rolling over, jumping though a hoop or standing on his back legs front paws up on me, have more or less just happened.

The walking is full of fun too. We often walk tracks in the bush beside a stream. Ngaio, the suburb in Wellington where I live, is rich in those sorts of places. So Brackie hunts the creeks for tennis balls which have been brought down by freshes and floods from the tennis courts and parks further upstream. Although flatcoats are gun dogs, I don’t shoot, so he doesn’t get a chance to fetch ducks or game but he certainly brings back tennis balls. He gives the impression he thoroughly enjoys himself. But even on the bush walks when he’s having fun Brackie is still at work. He’s keeping me company in places that are potentially dangerous for a slip or a fall. He’s with me when I meet others in the bush, whoever they may be. I’m not on my own.

And is it really work? I think so. I’m reminded of bus drivers I worked with some years ago. Those on ‘standby’ had to stay in the depot for the whole of their shift, but they chatted, played cards, or pool, read books or listened to the radio until a bus broke down or a driver took sick. Then off they went to do whatever they had to do. Brackie is a bit like a bus driver on standby shift – except that the shift is 24 hours a day every day.

If Brackie works does he get any pay? Yes he does. He gets what’s often called these days ‘a total remuneration package.’ I care for his food, shelter, health, security, exercise, and opportunities to have fun with other dogs. That’s not a bad contract for either of us, is it?

Although I know that to some dog owners this seems a strange and unnecessary way of thinking, to me it makes a lot of sense. ‘Pet’ I don’t acknowledge. ‘Working dog’ is an accurate and honourable description.

Notes:

This story was written first in November 2000 for the NZ Briard Newsletter *French Letters*. It was written about our dog Bree, a Briard. However the Briard people didn’t like it and never published it. That made me a bit annoyed because they had pled for stories from readers. So in early January 2013 I rewrote it for my website but this time making if fit Brackie, a flatcoat. So it’s the same thesis but different in detail because the breed characteristics are different. John.