

A boy and his working dog

part 2

by Linda Stone

If you ask most dog lovers why they own a dog, they will likely give you answers like unconditional love, companionship, comfort ... all intangible gifts that we can't quite explain, but know we can't live without. But we are realizing that "man's best friend" has many untapped skills and talents to share. In fact, there are people who literally may not be able to live without the skills of their canine companions. Having moved far beyond guide dogs for the blind, service dogs now assist people with many types of physical limitations as well as alerting them to cancer or an impending seizure. When I first read about Chino the diabetic alert dog and his boy, Demarco, of course I was curious as to how their story started. Lorraine Jessep, Inaugural President of Australia's Paws for Diabetics, was kind enough to share the history of the organization.

Watch: How did you first realize that dogs could alert to blood sugar level?

Lorraine: I first realized when my Japanese Chin Saki started to alert me before I knew myself that I was approaching a hypoglycemic attack, which is a drop in blood sugar level that, if untreated, can lead to coma and even death. Australian Champion Mingdon Aka Saki came to live with me at eight weeks. She was one of a little group that I took on weekly visits to the local hospital, and was a great favorite. From an early age, Saki seemed to *know* things, and we dubbed her our resident psychic. Twice she woke me when my tiny Pom was in trouble, saving his life. She started alerting me to impending diabetic hypos some years ago, and while proud of her abilities, I again put it down to her *psychic* abilities. When my diabetes became unstable and I started to have frequent hypos, I found myself really relying on her help. At that time I also lost the confidence to go out much, as I would be without her, and had to try and arrange to have my daughter accompany me, which wasn't always possible. I saw an item on the news about hypo-alert dogs in America, and set about finding out how to get my Saki recognized so she could go with me everywhere. I've lost count of the number of phone calls I made, but eventually I found ASDOGS (NQ) and progress was finally made.

Watch: Are there certain breeds you find to be more sensitive, and what breeds are they?

Lorraine: Yes, there are certain breeds we have found to be more sensitive to the work, but before we offend any devotees of other breeds, I must point out a couple of things. We certainly haven't tried ALL breeds, and of those we have, there has not been a breed that we consider not good enough to use again. We have however been very impressed with the Whippets, and our star performer is the Whippet Oscar partnered with a boy named Corey, now aged 12 years. Oscar was placed at eight weeks and started alerting on the second day. Within a week he was house-trained, and in two weeks toileting on command both on and off lead, and sitting and waiting till told he could eat before touching his dinner. Even before we had a chance to train him to do so, he figured out for himself to go and wake the parents when he couldn't wake Corey at night. He has at times tried to take the meter to Corey and sits and *supervises* when Corey eats something to treat the hypo. He has even begun alerting when Corey has a high reading, and misses virtually no lows. Of course we have other Whippets, and all have performed well. Chino actually holds the record for the shortest time to the first alert, but he was also the first we tried prior imprinting with, which helps get them started earlier but makes no difference in other aspects. But, I digress and now back to the question. The original breeds when PFD was formed were my Saki, a Japanese Chin, and Jet, a Shetland Sheepdog belonging to my co-founder, Barbara Katon. We started by thoroughly researching all aspects of a breed and only ventured to use breeds that seemed to fit the required criteria. I must thank the breeders who supplied us with information. We have Tenterfield Terriers, Chinese Cresteds, both hairless and coated, a Rottweiler, a Chihuahua, a Miniature Pinscher, a Boxer, a couple of cross-breeds and soon to appear a Poodle. We do NOT purchase cross-breeds, but if someone has one already alerting, we will accept it if it passes our temperament test.

Watch: Do you get your dogs from certain breeders with this job in mind, or can any dog be trained to alert?

Lorraine: Mostly we have purchased puppies from just a few carefully researched breeders, but are in the process of setting up our own breeding program. Pretty much any dog can be trained to alert, but there are some that are just much better than others, so of course we will stick with the proven ones. Within these boundaries, we then work on choosing the best breed to suit a client's lifestyle, much the same way as selecting the right breed for a companion. For example, a Chihuahua would not be suitable for the person who regularly runs five kilometers every day. Also we have to avoid the breeds that get possessive and *defend* their owners. We can't have a dog standing over a collapsed client preventing medical help. On that note, we also have to make sure a person has a dog that will be insistent enough to *force* them to listen, as when hypo, some people can refuse to listen, declaring they feel fine. The dogs have to be capable of ignoring orders at times and getting help if the person won't listen. Our star Oscar figured that out very early, to ignore Corey and go and get his parents to help.

Watch: How do you train the dogs for this work?

Lorraine: Basically, we make full use of what the pups will all do naturally, channel them into repeating what we need and discourage what we don't. The real secret is to read the pup correctly. Then it is constant close observation to keep the desired behavior happening. A really sound understanding of dogs and how they behave is necessary, along with the ability to read the dog. It is really just so simple, yet the slightest mistake can end the whole process, and then there is no other way but to train by scent discrimination, much like training dogs to sniff out drugs, explosives etc. Our plan relies heavily on the bonding between person and dog. Of course this works, as evidenced by all the stories one hears from people whose pet dog alerted them and they understood what the dog was telling them. Many more may have done it, but the owners didn't realize what the dog was telling them, and without encouragement, the dogs usually give up.

The hardest part for us is training people to recognize, encourage and reinforce alerting behavior. Trust me, this is much harder than training the dogs to behave in an appropriate manner when out in public. There are just some people who will never understand how to relate to a dog. We tell people that when their puppy arrives, from that moment on, they never leave the dog even to go to the bathroom. Where they go, they take the dog. No other person may even touch the dog, and of course the recipient must be the one to feed, toilet train, and do all other training under instruction as well. In the case of Chino, it was obvious that the mother was going to have to do a lot of things due to the age of the boy, and that brought concerns about bonding. This was when we decided to try prior imprinting. We had a sample of the boy's clothing (when hypo) sent to the breeder, who regularly gave the puppy the scent during the weeks beforehand. As a result, the puppy recognized the scent when he first met his new family and bonded very well with the boy, in spite of being fed, etc. by the mother. All our dogs also have to go through quite a lot of obedience training.

They must walk beside owners on a loose lead, sit automatically when the person stops, ignore distractions (other dogs, people) toilet on command and on lead, ignore food except their own meals, and *stay* when told, to name just a few.

Watch: Do you know of any similar organizations in the U.S. that you would recommend?

Lorraine: I only know about one organization in America, although I would imagine that there are more. We have had quite a few enquiries from America and have referred them to *Heaven Scent Paws*. We have a link to them on our web site. <http://www.pfd.org.au/>

Watch: How is your organization accepted by the public—are you ever met with skepticism or criticism?

Lorraine: This is my favorite question! Public acceptance is quite frankly, just deplorable, and mostly due to ignorance. These days everyone knows about guide dogs, and to a lesser extent, hearing dogs, but very few have ever heard of a medical alert dog for diabetics. Then because we don't use Labradors, there is the opinion that it couldn't possibly be doing anything of any *real* use. In Australia our dogs are covered under the Disability Discrimination Act of 1992. We have this act printed and laminated and each person is issued one along with an official photo ID for themselves and one for the dog. The dog also wears a distinctive green coat with insignia on it stating what they are doing. We also give the clients a letter to officially introduce and explain the dog's duties and rights, which we encourage them to take to all the places they normally go in their day-to-day business.

In spite of this, there are some who refuse entry to the dog, or some who insist the dog be carried. (Imagine a guide dog having to be carried!) Even after doing everything right and giving notice and explanations beforehand, clients are STILL often stopped by a security guard and forced to produce all the IDs and letter and a lengthy explanation, which doesn't always get them past security anyway. I have experienced this myself, and it is very frustrating, stressful and upsetting. Stress causes problems with anyone, but for a diabetic it can have severe repercussions indeed. We recently had to retrieve a puppy placed with a very elderly person. This couple (neither in good health) was so traumatized by the amount of constant harassment they had to endure EVERY time they went out that they just couldn't cope anymore.

This is totally unacceptable and we are hoping to do something about this sort of thing. The only real way is public education, and the only way to get that is going to be enough exposure through the media—not always an easy thing to do, but we are trying. Believe it or not, some of the worst skepticism comes from the most unlikely places, namely other diabetics and some in the medical fraternity. You could probably almost write a whole article on the stupid, ignorant, and often just plain funny things, that have been said by supposedly well-educated people. I have a stock answer for those who demand *scientific proof* about how the dogs do this. When you can scientifically explain how all the animals not restrained LEFT for high ground before the tsunami hit, then you may have your answer.

WW & Linda Stone thank Lorraine Jessep and Paws for Diabetics for taking the time to help us gain more insight in the world of the Working Service Dog!

Linda Stone resides in Illinois with her family which includes four Whippets and one french bulldog. They participate in Whippet racing and conformation shows. 🐾