

ADDICTED TO DEERHOUNDS

By Virginia Hawke

In November 1974 our first litter of Deerhounds was born. Forty four litters and forty two years later we are still involved in the breed and find it hard to believe just how fast the time has flown by. Our fascination with Deerhounds has resulted in a lifestyle rich in friendships and experiences beyond our imagination. Sometimes I wonder just how it all happened and then I look into the eyes of one of our beautiful dogs and I know.

In 1972 we replied to an advertisement in a rural newspaper that described puppies for sale as '*Deerhounds, sometimes known as Staghounds*'. They seemed to be just what we were looking for. Later that evening we arrived home with our first Deerhound. Her registered name was Rickaby Ann, we called her Heidi and she was special.

We were young with small children and a farm to run and needless to say stretched for money. We prided ourselves in the fact that Heidi had cost us less than the going price because of her light colour. She was almost straw coloured as a pup and the breed standard maintained the darker hounds were the ones that depicted quality. Thank goodness this phrase has now been omitted from the UK breed standard, albeit a bit too late to save the fawn colours.

We loved hunting and coursing with long dogs and owned a couple of these. Heidi grew into a lovely, tall, sound Deerhound and with her included in the equation we innocently considered our hunting pack was the ultimate.

Heidi outshone the other dogs in all aspects of fieldwork and this helped us to conclude that another Deerhound was definitely needed. Her pedigree was predominantly 'Atlas' bloodlines so we decided that is where we should go. A few phone calls later we were talking to the owner of Atlas kennels, Charles Venables (Chas) who lived near Sale in Victoria. Chas definitely had the gift of the gab when it came to selling dogs and he had no trouble selling us ten week old Atlas Reiver. Little did we realise then that Chas would remain an important part of our lives until his death.

Reiver was packed up and sent in a train dog box to our home town of Parkes. That is how the majority of dogs were sent then. He never really thrived, and years later we found out he was an orphan puppy, raised virtually by hand and the only one in the litter to survive.

His type was different to many of the Atlas hounds from that era. He was very dark, tall and elegant. His sire was Lochfyne Tarquin who was bred by Graeme and Dianne Birch and that could have accounted for his more elegant appearance. He died when only three years while chasing a hare, possibly from heartworm as a couple of years later our dogs were diagnosed with this terrible worm. Our vets could not believe heartworm could be as far south as central NSW

Luckily, Reiver sired two litters to Heidi before he died so we were at least on our way to having a never ending pack of hunting dogs. Our kennel prefix was registered as Nelungaloo. We lived and dreamed Deerhounds and discussed long and hard how we could breed one good enough to exhibit and win at the local shows.

Our first litter was advertised in the 'Land' newspaper and all bar Ch. Nelungaloo Sally went off to hunting homes. That was fine with us, after all that is what the dogs were bred to do. The advertisement in the newspaper also introduced us to another deerhound owner namely Wayne Fisher from Canberra and he in turn introduced us to The Deerhound Club of Victoria.

The bi monthly magazine from the club was a fountain of information; we gleaned everything we could from it. We discovered other people who owned and bred Deerhounds with similar interests to our own. Life was great!

The articles in the magazine were both informative and provocative. They included controversial hunting stories from Mal Finlow, thought provoking articles by 'Uncle Mac' 'Aunt Sally' and Julian Guthrie as well as straight down the line letters from the leader of the pack Chas Venables

Chas was a diehard hunter from way back and we loved that about him. He had an uncanny knack for writing letters to the magazine that could get many members absolutely ropeable, that used to keep things rolling along nicely as far as 'Letters to the Editor' were concerned.

Chas liked to win in the show ring. Anyone around the Deerhound Club shows during the 1980s could never forget Ch. Atlas Argus! His main priority however was the field and his dogs were always very good in that department. He kept them hard, fit and functional. He was ruthless with any hound that could not perform in the field to his satisfaction and was a total believer in culling "*for the good of the breed.*" We argued hard and fast with him about whether a Deerhound could ever just be a pet. He believed as long as they had a hunting instinct within them they could not and he never treated them as such. In his later years he became very concerned that the breed was becoming something it never was bred to be.

In the early days of the club, hunting with Deerhounds was generally accepted as part and parcel of the nature of the breed in Australia. These days hunting with Deerhounds is not in favour. What this new age attitude will eventually do to the breeds' physical form and mental abilities is anybody's guess.

Our second litter produced our first home bred Champion. A tall, good looking dog called Nelungaloo Top Hank. We entered the Deerhound Club Parade in 1976 and Hank won Best in Show. Here we were, at our first breed show and wow, what a confidence booster. Hank became a popular stud dog after this and the whole Deerhound thing compounded. We purchased Atlas Dai Sheba from Chas and Jocelyn and Kevin Davidson and bred her to Top Hank. This breeding gave us Nelungaloo Loosen Up and Nelungaloo Huntalong. These dogs were pillars in our kennel.

We discovered Melbourne and Sydney Royal shows. They were events not to be missed. Deerhounds were generally exhibited in very good numbers and it was a chance to catch up with fellow enthusiasts. I don't think there was much worry about who won these shows. It was more about having a good old talk about dogs and their achievements in the field. There was such a feeling of camaraderie, all striving to put Deerhounds in Australia on the map.

In 1980 the club invited Miss Anastatia Noble (Tasia) of the famed Ardkinglas Kennels to judge the Championship Show. This really was a milestone and I think most members were excited not only meet her but also to glean information about the breed. There were forty six exhibitors and eighty six exhibits, a far cry from the shows of today.

Fate plays a hand in life and it certainly did as far as our relationship with Tasia was concerned. A few months prior to the show we received a letter from Tasia. That was a surprise in itself. She told us of penfriends living in the Parkes district to whom she had sent 'The Field' magazine for many years and would it be possible for her to travel back to Parkes after the show? We were over the moon and suggested she may like to go hunting and camping for a few days as well as visit with her friends. She accepted our invitation and asked if her long time friend, Malcolm Douglas who now lived in New Zealand could also come. Malcolm was delightful company and had been a deerstalker when he lived in Scotland.

So here we all were out in the middle of nowhere with a doyen of the breed. It was great! Tasia loved field sports with the dogs and she was full of enthusiasm. She was much the same age as we are now and we thought we would have to be slower and more careful than usual. How wrong we were! She loved the whole atmosphere of being in the Australian bush.

Huntalong did not go to the Champ. Show as she toed out slightly in her front feet. When Tasia saw her she asked why we had not exhibited her, we told her just that. Tasia let us know in no uncertain manner that we should have had her at the show. "*We do not have spring of rib in UK like that anymore.*" I have never forgotten that statement and have endeavoured to keep spring of rib as an important factor within our dogs.

In fact, Tasia instilled in us the need to follow our gut feeling when breeding. As we drove back to Parkes together across the Riverina plains she told us how we should look at the big picture and try things that the eye found right. I think she followed her own advice when she judged the 1980 Champ. Show and placed Ch Ballewan Gremlin Challenge dog. He was very different from the type being exhibited in the UK at that time and she was the first to admit this. There was just something she really admired about him and she followed her intuitions. Gremlin went on to win much more and he sired some very lovely offspring.

Tasia was intrigued by the Deerhounds in Australia and was convinced they had Wolfhound incorporated in their bloodlines. Chas Venables did introduce a Wolfhound into his Deerhound kennel many years earlier (1950s) but I doubt

that would have still been visible by the 1980s. I think rather the hunting fraternity may have just kept a heavier headed or generally larger type of dog. She was also intrigued by kangaroos and she thought them the most ungainly of creatures.

During the nineteen eighties fox skins were bringing good money and I would walk for hours hunting these elusive creatures. For me, this was my greatest time with Deerhounds as it was the time I observed their every movement. I watched and wondered why and how some dogs were better than others. I concentrated on each hound's physical power, speed and agility as well as their innate desire to do the job. I learnt far more than I could ever learn from a book or by following show ring criteria.

The conclusions I reached are still very important to me and determine my opinion as to what constitutes a good Deerhound. It became blatantly obvious that if a Deerhound was over the breed standard in height and weight it rendered itself more than often useless for consistent work in the field. These dogs generally lacked staying power, agility and speed. They broke down too easily. Deerhounds with the right hunting technique did not need to be of great size to achieve the desired result. The old saying form follows function is certainly important and more than anything else this saying reinforced in me the need for a good front and in particular length of upper arm. In saying this, it is still only part of what constitutes an ideal working Deerhound. There are certain attributes that can be ascertained nowhere else than in testing and difficult circumstances and these have absolutely nothing to do with physical anatomy. Rather they are to do with the hound's brains, willpower and bid ability. Without these the Deerhound is no longer a hunting hound as he cannot be relied on or trusted.

There were quite a few puppies sired by Top Hank floating around at this time and some of these puppies were incorporated in new kennels. Most notable of these kennels were Casbairn (Kaye and Steve Parnell) and Stringyridge.(Di and Trev Corthorne). Chas Venables was the chosen guru and as a result we all followed him to his favourite hunting ground in the South West NSW. The years ahead were based on strong friendships and great fun camping trips with Chas voicing his opinion at '*elevensies*' on everything from the absolute superiority of Atlas Deerhounds to the existence or non existence of God.

Behind the seat of his Land Rover Chas kept his well seasoned coloured anodized cups. He filled a cup with red wine once or twice a day and then his stories would be grander still.

Tasia returned to Australia in 1987. Keen for more experiences in the wide open spaces, we decided to take her somewhere different this time, so we met up with Chas for a few days hunting. There was a feeling of one upmanship between Tasia and Chas at the beginning so we packed them both off in Chas's Land Rover for the day. They arrived back in camp the best of friends having had a wonderful day with the Atlas hounds performing at their best.

In 1983 Gayle Bontecou, well known judge and long time Deerhound breeder from USA judged our Champ Show. After the show Gayle and her husband Jess visited us at Parkes for a few days. During this time we discussed swapping dogs and as a result Nelungaloo Screw Loose (Butch) joined her kennel in the States and we imported Gaylewards Ambassador (Simon). Simon was a lovely, elegant, healthy fellow and he opened up otherwise rather restricted bloodlines in Australia. He was the first Deerhound to be imported from USA. We value our friendship with Gayle and her husband Jess. They have been so generous with their hospitality. The last time we visited was in 2004 and Gayleward Deerhounds were as lovely as ever.

With the incorporated new blood we became more enthusiastic than ever. Exhibiting our Deerhounds became important and we had some lovely ones to parade around the show ring. This was the era of Fleet, Streak, Huntalong and Casbairn Go Lightly.

We have never believed in keeping our Deerhounds in cotton wool and as a result every Deerhound we have owned has had a great life galloping and playing in the wide open spaces. As with all livestock, you win some and lose some. Inevitably, things always seem to happen to the best! Fast dogs have accidents. Not necessarily while chasing anything but just because they love to run. The saddest are the ones that are oozing quality and have never bred on. Streak and Time to Fly were two such losses. I don't think you ever get over losing a much loved Deerhound, whatever the circumstances.

To be continued