

A Pack of Ridgebacks

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"Jess," a Rhodesian Ridgeback

Ridgebacks are not, strictly speaking, gundogs in the accepted sense of the word, but the breed has been evolved to suit certain forms of shooting in Rhodesia. In following up lion, leopard, pig and certain antelope, a foolhardy dog often gets killed, while a coward is useless. The Ridgeback is wise and courageous and suits conditions admirably. As the name denotes, its salient feature is a crest of hair standing erect along the withers and back. Jess was presented to me over seven years ago, by a kindly tobacco grower who is a noted breeder of these dogs. On the way home from his estate, an incident occurred which still sticks in my memory. The puppy shared the front seat of the car with me, and the strange motion proving too much for her, she deposited her breakfast in my lap. A clean pair of shorts lay in my suitcase, so it was the work of a moment to jump out onto the lonely bush road and effect a quick change. While I was thus engaged, a car containing two ladies passed by, leaving me covered in confusion, if not by the clean shorts.

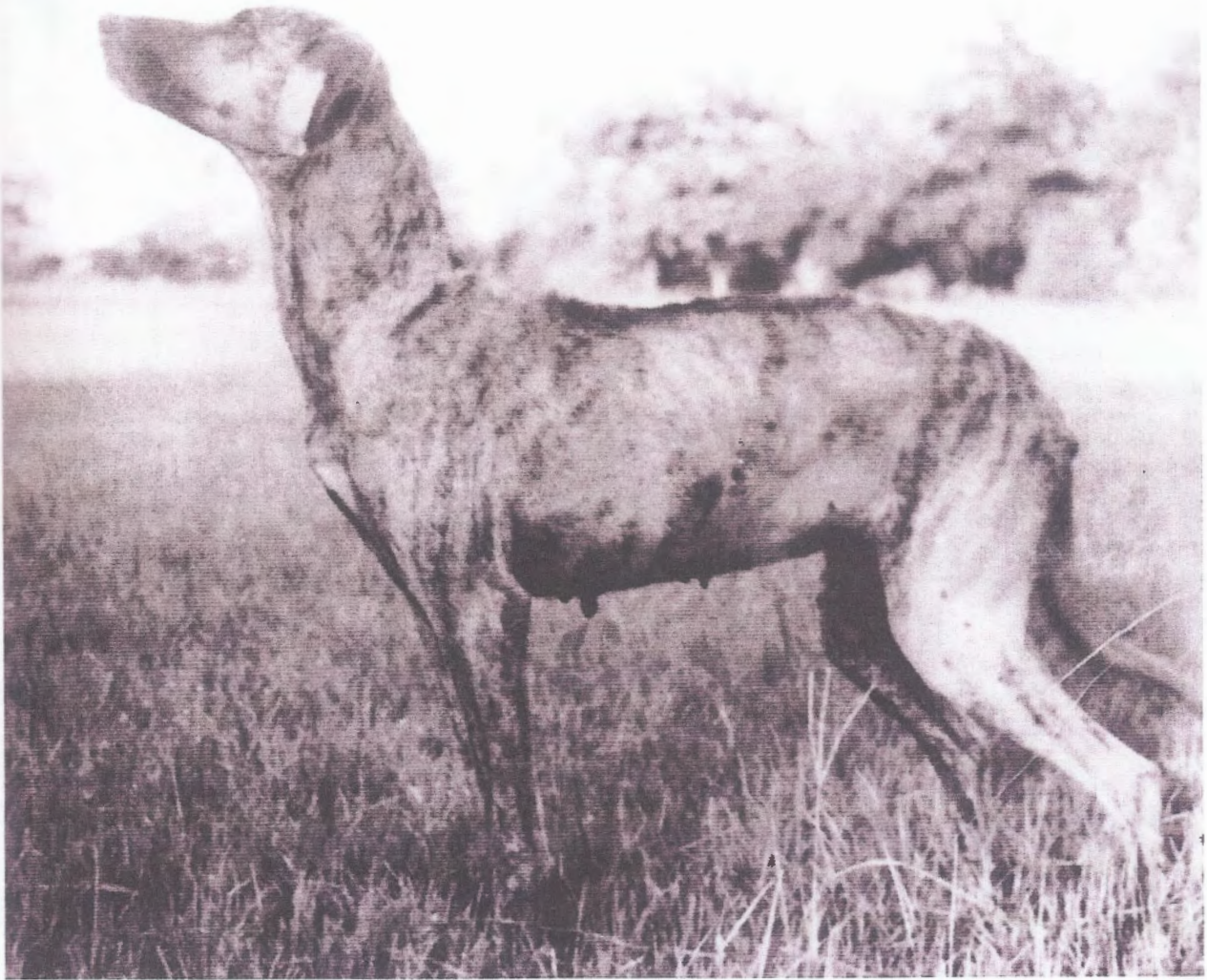
The puppy developed into a fine young bitch, standing some 22 inches and weighing a little over 60 pounds. Although she had a perfect ridge, she was not the true wheaten colour of her breed, but inclined to a brindles. Her head was wide with plenty of room for brains and she proved to be both fast and bold. Jess had her first encounter with a leopard soon after she was old enough to be taken out hunting of an evening. The

brute slipped out of a bamboo thicket and endeavoured to seize the dog, but she eluded his first rush and I got him with a bullet through the neck. Since then, when assisted by other dogs, Jess has always hunted leopards with all the ability of a terrier after a tabby. In the course of her life, she has contracted and survived various complaints and illnesses commonly fatal to dogs in this country. First of all she suffered from biliary fever. Then she became infected with tripanosomiasis from the bite of the tsetse fly and was at death's door, but her life was saved by timely treatment with a new Bayer product. This was an event of such rarity as to provide material for such learned discussion among the veterinarians responsible for the cure. Most unfortunately, she has never bred since this illness.

Two years ago she had an encounter with a spitting cobra, which ejected its venom into her eyes and blinded her, but she contrived to make a complete recovery. It was not until Jess was over three years old that her true worth became apparent. Four lions had visited the cattle kraal, killing several cows. I arrived on the scene in time to dispatch one of the raiders, and then, accompanied by a native tracker and by Jess, commenced to spoor up the rest of the pride. Jess straightaway took up the lead, proceeding at a steady pace and keeping not more than ten to fifteen paces in front. Few dogs will follow lion, and not one in thousands will do so in this manner. The clever bitch led us thus for some miles, until we found our quarry lying up in a small patch of sunburnt grass. Jess drew them out of this by her barking, and two more were killed.

Normally, Jess pays little attention to natives, and is never aggressive toward them, but if I speak sharply to a boy, she is immediately all abristle and will not be pacified until the offender has removed himself. My house is an isolated one and during my absences from home, Jess constitutes an excellent guard and always sleeps in my wife's room. One of this dog's self-imposed domestic duties has been to accompany the baby in its perambulator on early morning walks. One day, a squad of native labourers chanced to pass near the pram, and some of them halted to pay their respects to the occupant. Jess did not appreciate this and routed the entire contingent, who disappeared in full flight down the road with the bitch snapping viciously at their heels. But her speciality was Guinea Fowl, and she wages eternal war on the entire species. If there is a flock of these birds within half a mile of the route of our evening stroll, be sure the clever old dog will seek them out. When she finds them, she charges with much noise and the flock rise to seek refuge in the neighbouring trees where they offer a pretty target for the .22 at 50' yards range.

As a privileged person, Jess is allowed to sleep on the verandah, and one night about eighteen months ago a leopard stole in and seized her. Somehow, she escaped from its clutches and not only this, but drove it off the premises. The wounds were immediately syringed out with peroxide and carefully dressed, and no serious results ensued. Early one morning last year, a panting native ran with the news that he had just encountered three lions, only half a mile distant. I took a rifle and



accompanied by Kefa my tracker, Jess and a young Great Dane, I hastened to the spot. We followed the lions for some distance, eventually locating them in an exceedingly dense clump of tall, matted grass and thorn bush. Unhesitatingly Jess went straight in, followed by the young Dane – Kefa and I remained on the outer fringe. The most appalling uproar ensued. Coughs, grunts and roars from the lions were intermingled with the continuous barking and growling of the two dogs. The grass was violently agitated by the passage of heavy bodies. Eventually the din became localised, where the two dogs had evidently bayed up one of the lions. Then a yelp of pain interrupted the barking, and although visibility was restricted to about three feet, I commenced to move in to the assistance of the dogs. At this point, Kefa put his hand on my shoulder

and, in no measured or respectful terms, told me not to be a fool. So I stayed put. Soon after this, the noise died down and both dogs emerged. Jess was bleeding from wounds on her right shoulder, where she had barely avoided receiving the full stroke of the lion's paw. As it was, the claws had ripped the depth of her hide, fortunately without more serious injury. Having some potassium permanganate in the butt trap of my rifle, I promptly rubbed the raw crystals into the wound. A week later, barring a slight stiffness, the old bitch was none the worse for her narrow escape.

I now have a miniature pack of seven Ridgebacks of which Jess is the sage and mentor. In her old age, she has gone to skin and bone, rather than to fat. She walks slowly and stiffly, except when I take a rifle from the rack. Out in the bush, she

sheds her years and ranges wide and faster than any of the others, in search of bush pig and warthog. They all know her voice and rally to her call. Whenever one of the young entry requires correction with the whip, Jess stands by, all hairs on end, and as soon as the delinquent is released, she falls on it tooth and nail enforcing the lesson and bringing it up to the way it should go.

The old Afrikaner hunters, Cornelius van Rooyen and others, who adventured north of the Limpopo, evolved the Ridgeback breed because they required a dog which was bold enough to bay up dangerous game such as lion and leopard, yet too clever to rush in and get killed. The Ridgeback was the answer. It is believed to have its origin with Boer dogs of mixed ancestry crossed with the Hottentot hunt-

ing from which comes the distinctive ridge of hair running along the spine against the lie of the coat with the twin whorls over the withers. The result is a smooth coated dog, of a wheaten red colour, standing 25" to 27" at the withers; strong, active and well suited to the country and its climate. More than 40 years ago, I was posted to a remote station in what was then north-eastern Rhodesia. I kept a pack of about a dozen Ridgebacks, partly to guard my home during my frequent absences and partly for the purpose for which they had been evolved. Feeding them was no problem in those days. Native women would sell maize meal at 6d for a petrol tin containing about 30 pounds while meat could be obtained for the hunting. In these days of meat shortage one looks back with nostalgia to the time when dogs could gorge to repletion on raw flesh.

The surrounding countryside was mostly covered with light forest, interspersed with open glades known as "dambos" and there was a good population of game as kudu, waterbuck, reed-buck and smaller antelopes. There were also bush pig, warthogs, lion and leopard.

It was a great sport to sally forth in the cool of the evening to hunt for the pot or for adventure, carrying a .30 h v Mannlicher-Schoenaur using 150 grain copper-tipped bullets which were adequate for all soft skinned game.

The dogs were quite undisciplined in the modern sense, so they were coupled in pairs with rawhide thongs and each pair was restrained by an African retainer, in a style resembling the tapestries of medieval English hunting scenes. They followed some 200-300 yards behind myself and the tracker and in the event of game being only wounded, we would shout back for the dogs to be loosed. They would tear past full pelt and follow up the buck, perhaps a kudu bull, and harass it until it stood at bay, possibly in a river pool. I would follow up at a trot and finish off our quarry with all despatch. Whenever possible I shot males only. As may well be imagined, we enjoyed some exciting incidents.

The matriarch of the pack was old Jess. She has been clawed by

both lion and leopard and escaped without serious injury. She had the unique gift of being keen to follow up the trail of lions, at a walk and perhaps 30-40 yards in front of me. Money could not buy such a dog. One night a pride of lions raided the kraal where the milking cows were kept. Going to the spot, in the early dawn, with only Jess and my tracker, a lioness was killed by a bullet in the base of her neck, as she lay feeding from a still living Jersey cow. The other three departed with great bounds into the bush. Guided by Jess, we followed them for some miles until they stood at bay, with the courageous bitch snapping and snarling around them, in reply to their rumbling growls. I shot two of them and wounded the third. With Jess and the tracker working together we followed it a long way before the spoor was finally lost.

On another occasion, the pack was running unleashed when they startled an enormous warthog boar. It set off through the bush with the dogs at its heels. It must have been well away from its burrow for we ran over a mile without a check. Then I found my gallant Tweed, with his shoulder cut to the bone by the boars sharp tushes. A little farther on, Tummel lay dead, his back broken where he had been flung against a tree. Then the boar came to a halt in a clearing, chopping his jaws with rage, the dogs leaping around him. I quickly fired but, blown by the run missed my aim. At the shot, the dogs closed in on their quarry but poor Doon staggered back, her throat slashed wide, blood spurting in great jets. A second shot avenged her and the great hog fell. Cutting two light poles, we constructed a stretcher from my khaki drill shirt and carried Tweed home, where his wound was stitched and he made a good recover. We returned with a party of Africans and torches; buried Tummel and Doon, and took home the truly enormous warthog. This was the only occasion on which any of the pack were killed, which illustrates their cleverness at avoiding danger.

Some of the dogs slept on the verandah of the house, which was enclosed by wire mosquito netting. One night I was roused by a tremen-

dous rumpus from them and made my way barefooted and drowsy, to discover what the uproar was all about. There was a full moon and by its light I could discern the shape of what might be a dog just outside the door. I counted the dogs – six – correct, and then it dawned on my sleepy mind that the beast outside must be a leopard. I swiftly reached for the Mannlicher, walked on to the step and took a snap shot at the shadowy figure racing across the lawn. Then, closing the door, prudently returned to bed. In the morning, with the tracker and all the dogs, we investigated and found a blood spoor. There is nothing more dangerous than a wounded leopard and we followed with extreme caution. The dogs located it in a dense patch of long grass, within a mile of the house. Stimulated by their barking, it came streaking out uttering a series of hoarse grunts but a bullet killed it before any damage was done.

Not all our game came into the dangerous category. Guinea-fowl were plentiful and if there were a covey about, old Jess would locate it and set them up in a thorn tree and sit underneath barking, until I arrived. Using a .22 one could sometimes bag half a dozen birds and excellent eating they were.

On one of our evening strolls, I found the entire pack gazing intently down a warthog burrow. As it happened, I was carrying a 12-bore and, squatting down among the dogs in front of the hole, I also peered down it. There came a rumble and a snort and a hog emerged at speed. Before falling over backwards, I discharged my gun. Pig and dogs vanished amid much clamour. Several piglets also came out and disappeared into the bush. Following the dogs, I found that they had grappled with their prey and killed it. It had been handicapped as my random shot had hit it in the snout.

There were many such occurrences; some adventure, great or small, almost every time we went out. It was all excellent sport while it lasted. But now game is to be found only in Reserves and parks and it costs much money only to see it while Ridgeback can hunt only in their dreams. ••