

# Bred to meet a need – the Ridgeback's adaptable history made him hunter and guard

by Mylda Arsenis

*Tho' my origin is obscure  
Some like to think my breed is pure,  
Indeed, of my ridge I am most proud,  
An outstanding figure in any crowd;  
In Africa a friend to all,  
Tho' firstly to the Aboriginal,  
He used me in the hunt with pride,  
And found me faithful by his side,  
So may this chapter recommend  
The Ridgeback to you as a friend.*

CENTURIES AGO, when the first white people arrived in South Africa, they found that the Hottentots at the Cape were using dogs of the ridgeback type for hunting purposes. The peculiar ridge of hair, running parallel to the spine and in reverse to the rest of the dog's coat, at once distinguished it from other breeds.

Early in the nineteenth century, the Rev Isaac Taylor, in his book, 'Scenes in Africa and America', wrote of ostrich hunts at the Cape in which packs of dogs were used. Presumably these dogs were of a similar type to those later described by George McCall Theal, litt. D.Ltd in a book entitled 'The Yellow and Dark-Skinned People of Africa south of the Zambesi'. Theal wrote that the Hottentot hunting dog was "an ugly creature, his body being shaped like that of a jackal, and his hair on his spine being turned forward, but he was a faithful, serviceable animal of his kind".

During the nineteenth century big game hunting flourished in Southern Africa, particularly in the area north of the Limpopo River, later to become known as Rhodesia after its founder, Cecil John Rhodes.

Hunters were quick to realise the value and importance of good hunting dogs. In choosing dogs to fill this role it was natural that they turned to an indigenous breed – the Ridgeback – a dog which had for generations proved such a boon to the African Hottentot with his primitive weapons of the chase.

## In favour

Frederick Courtenay Selous was one of many hunters who favoured these ridgeback dogs for hunting. Towards the close of the last century he spent a number of years hunting and exploring in the Matabele and Mashone territories (Southern Rhodesia), and recorded his experiences and adventures in a book which he called 'A Hunter's Wanderings in Africa'. From Selous' writings it is evident that he was very attached to his dogs, especially one named Bill, undoubtedly a real veteran of the chase. This dog was once saved from a horrible death (from a crocodile) by his master. Ironically, Bill met a tragic end by a similar occurrence in later years.



Photo by 'The Herald', Harare  
*Mylda Arsenis with Mpani's Kasikana*

As to the origin of the Ridgeback and its hunting abilities, the 'Handbook of the Rhodesian Ridgeback Club', Salisbury, Southern Rhodesia, has this to say: "The origin of the breed is not definitely known, but the most generally accepted view seems to be that he is the result of an intermixture of the Cuban Bloodhound and the Hottentot hunting dog, the latter supplying the characteristic ridge.

From such a breeding one would expect just such characteristics as the Ridgeback so markedly shows: speed, power, courage, fidelity and affection, and in addition, a remarkable skill in tackling wild animals. Unfortunately for the breed, the name 'Liondog' got attached to this dog because several of the earlier big game hunters – van Rooyen, Selous, Upcher and others – found them outstandingly the best for lion hunting, and this led many unthinking people to assume that the dogs were the actual killers of lions.

A little thought would have made it clear that no dog known would have any chance in an actual fight with a lion. What the Ridgebacks do and do effectively, is to harass the lion by constant and cleverly made feint

attacks until he, or she, is held up in sheer bewilderment, giving the hunter exactly what he is waiting for – a deliberate shot at close range. To do this effectively needs courage, agility, endurance, and an instinctive skill, which this breed seems to possess in a striking degree.”

The dogs invariably hunt in packs of four or five, although occasionally one dog is used. On scenting game (not necessarily lion) the pack fan out, one running directly towards the quarry, while the others circle with the object of cutting off any retreat. At this stage their amazing agility is displayed – the ability to turn in a split second, swerve and feint, or maintain a fast pace should their quarry break and run, and a chase ensue.

With the advent of long-range rifles fitted with telescopic sights, hunters have in most instances dispensed with the use of dogs so the Ridgeback has had to turn to another vocation, that of guard dog, a duty that he performs equally well. It is in this role that he now figures prominently throughout Africa, and to some extent in India, England and the United States of America. Although not an aggressive dog, the Ridgeback is distinctly reserved with strangers and usually objects to them making the first advances to him. He may keep them under surveillance for a time before PASSING them. His friendship, once given, is for life.

## Discouraging presence

One well known Rhodesian breeder of Ridgebacks has not locked a door in her house for 20 years. Whether she is at home or not is immaterial; the presence of several Ridgebacks on her property is sufficient to discourage trespassers.

An inherent trait of the breed (not always appreciated by owners) is the dogs' love of unrestrained freedom. He resents being confined in any way, or restrained by a leash. This possibly explains why South African Police tests made with Ridgebacks were only partly successful.

Of the suitability of the breed for African conditions there can be no doubt. Instinctive knowledge of the proper behaviour in the presence of snakes, scorpions etc, plus the ease with which they are kept free of ticks, endows the Ridgeback with prospects of a longer life than an imported dog.

In order to restore the purity of this indigenous breed, a Rhodesian Ridgeback club was formed in 1924. Prior to that time, short and long-haired dogs of various colours were to be seen, the principle distinguishing feature being the ridge of hair on the back. The conscientious efforts of the club have been amply rewarded, for the modern Rhodesian Ridgeback presents an attractive, alert appearance and retains all the sterling qualities of his ancestor, the Hottentot hunting dog. May he always be found faithful and serviceable to man as his forebear was to the African Hottentot.



*Serengeti Mara, an early Australian Ridgeback owned by Miss Janet Murray*