

Qweekend.

BELIEVE IT OR NOT, I AM A WORKING DOG

Clever canines
and the people
who depend
on them

By Leisa Scott



IN THE SWIM WHO INSPIRES THE CAMPBELL SISTERS? PAUL PITICCO THE ROCK 'N' ROLL RESTAURATEUR

companions



HIS BREED IS WHIP-SMART ... RED ALREADY HAS 62 COMMANDS IN HIS REPERTOIRE.

Match fit ... Justin Jordan trains Red Dog; (below) Red on duty as junior mascot of the Queensland Reds Super Rugby team.



need a break, and has put his leatherwork to good use, creating collars and leads for ADA to sell. "I love the dogs," Mack says, "they put a smile on your face every day." There are four other back-up handlers, one of them relaxing on the wheelchair used to teach the dogs how to work with people with physical disabilities.

The hero, though, is Opal, Toby's charge, a 10-month-old dog that will be headed to Sydney in mid-August. "Because she's doing so well, they want to take her straightaway," he says. "So she's going soon but I think that's awesome because she's going to help someone who's stuck in a wheelchair, so that's a job well done. You always know it's not your dog, anyway. She gets her parole."

Outside, on the patio of the self-contained wing of the prison, beyond the sight of the razor wire, Toby asks Opal to "find" the phone. He doesn't specify the phone yet because the old-fashioned model on the table might not resemble her new owner's phone. Such subtleties will be refined in Sydney. The word "find" and a point in its direction suffices. She saunters over, grips the handset with her mouth and returns. "Lap," says Toby, and she drops it in his lap. There's kibble as reward. And a pat. "This can be a harsh environment," says Toby,

"so having the dogs brings a bit of normality into this life. You've got someone to hang out with." There are downsides, though. "Most labs do snore," he says, grinning. "I had one, Marco, and he snored like a freight train. And if they eat a bone or something that upsets them, and you can't get them out [of the cell] quick enough, it can really smell."

DIRT AND DUST, FLIES AND STUBBORN COWS: that's the environment dogs such as this one were bred to work in. Red cattle dogs don't usually have ringside seats at one of the world's best football fields, access to the post-match function in Suncorp Stadium's plush Paddington Room and adoring fans at every outing. But Red Dog got lucky. Yep, says his trainer, Justin Jordan, "of all the jobs they could have, he's got a fun one".

Red, the six-month-old pup playing with a toy on Jordan's manicured lawn in Albany Creek, in Brisbane's outer north, has scored big-time in his role as chief canine and junior mascot for the state's Super Rugby team, the Queensland Reds. He's no slouch, though. His breed is renowned for being whip-smart but even Jordan is surprised Red already has 62 commands in his repertoire. "He just swallows it up," Jordan says. Red goes to all

manner of publicity events where he bows and twirls for adoration, is in training to deliver the kicking tee next year and leads the team out onto the field at home games at Suncorp in front of thousands of screaming fans. "His work is demanding," insists Jordan, "but it's only for a couple of hours here and a couple of hours there and if he mucks it up, oh well, he's cute, he can get away with it. If a guide dog mucks it up, there are some pretty serious consequences, potentially."

Right now, Red is learning about consequences. He lives most of the time with veterinarian Bernie Bredhauer, but stays with Jordan three days a week, which involves interacting with Jordan's dogs: Lex, a labrador that makes visits to nursing homes, and Zed, a rottweiler. Red is trying to take a chewy bone off Zed. A soft growl emits from Zed's lips. "So many people are terrified of rottweilers but look at that," says Jordan; "you've got a puppy that only stays here a few days a week trying to take a bone out of his mouth. Eventually, if Red keeps pushing, Zed might go 'rah' and snap, but you know, that's a fair call. It teaches Red boundaries."

After years of work as a senior manager in the automotive industry, Jordan had the resources to quit ten years ago and pursue his dream of setting up a dog-training business. Most of his work is dealing with problem dogs at risk of being re-homed or put down because of bad behaviour. "It's so rewarding to save a dog's life." Being Red's trainer brings different rewards – such as being in the thick of it on game day.

Before a Super Rugby game, Jordan and Red go out to the precinct in front of Suncorp Stadium to meet the fans. They do the same at half-time, with Red walking the perimeter and giving out "hugs". "I touch the fence and say 'hugs' and he'll stand up on his back legs and put his paws there so the person on the other side of the fence gets to pat him," says Jordan. "People absolutely adore him; it's huge marketing for the Reds, hugely successful and helps with that engagement with the mums and the kids."

During a match, Red and Jordan sit on the sideline. Once, Jordan had to throw his body over Red's to protect him from an incoming ball and thundering feet. Sometimes Red lays his head down on the hallowed turf and has a kip. "He's only a puppy, and it's a big, big day for him so if he wants to have a snooze, great. Have a sleep, buddy," Jordan says. When a try is in the offing or a penalty goal set to be taken, it's game on. Jordan gets word through an earpiece that the cameras are about to turn to Red, and the pup is up on his feet, ready to work. The little Aussie cattle dog fills the big screen and he spins, he rolls, he begs, he high-fives. A ripple of delight scampers through the cauldron. Win or draw, Red Dog puts a smile on our faces ... and that's the best job any dog can do. ●

* Names have been changed.