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Training Lassie is a labor of love

Wednesday, October 18, 2006

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Recently, some of the kid reporters at Newsday saw the new movie Lassie and really liked it. It is about a family that owned Lassie, but because of money troubles had to sell her to a new family that lived hundreds of miles away.

Lassie escapes from that family and makes it back to the family that she loves. After the movie, the reporters met with Lassie, trainer Carol Riggins and veterinarian Dr. Jeff Werber.

Lassie, whose real name is Hey-Hey, is almost 9 years old and is the ninth generation of Lassie. He is a collie, a herding breed from Scotland. In the movie, Hey-Hey plays a female.



SAMUEL GOLDWYN FILMS
 Hey-Hey, whose stage name is Lassie, stars in the recent film by the same name.

Q: How did you get involved with training Lassie?

Carol: I actually started as a wild-animal trainer. I've been with Lassie for 14 years.

Q: How long does it take to train Lassie for a movie?

Carol: It depends on what the dog has to do, but usually it is six weeks of preparation.

Jeff: When you have a famous dog like Lassie or Beethoven (the star of a 1992 movie), there usually is more than one because it is so hard for them to work so much. Lassie has her own stand-in.

Q: How did you train the dog?

Carol: They learn commands. Q: Is she your dog? Jeff: She lives with Carol. Carol takes care of her, but everyone owns Lassie. She is a movie dog and a pet. Q: Are there special people who watch Lassie while she films a movie?

Jeff: Absolutely. There is so much concern that Lassie does not get hurt. One of the organizations is the American Humane Association; their job is to make sure that every animal on the set is well taken care of, and they get their break and eat and drink.

Q: Does Lassie have an agent?

Jeff: Yes!

Q: What type of food does Lassie eat? Can she eat table food?

Jeff: No table food. Lassie has her own dog food: Natural Way. It is all natural dog food with no preservatives, sweeteners or artificial coloring. She loves it.

Q: Does Lassie always do what she is told?

Jeff: Lassie is better than my children. It takes awhile for Lassie to learn, but dogs learn by trial and error. Ultimately, they do the right thing, and when they do, you reward them. They like the reward, and they will do it

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again and again. Eventually, you can put a name or hand signal to the behavior with the hope that when they do the right thing, you give them lots of love.

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