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This Star Works for Chicken Bits

By WILLIAM L. HAMILTON Published: May 28, 2006

THERE are those who would claw, beg or crawl to get into the movies or on television.

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Lassie Films Limited

It actually takes four noble-looking collies to play the title role in the remake of "Lassie."

If they're good at it, they do.

Hollywood has its hits, like "Mission: Impossible III" and "Desperate Housewives." And when it does, dogs take their turn in the winner's circle, too. Tom Cruise's best friend in his new "Mission: Impossible" is Tanner, a yellow Lab. Casey, a basset hound, plucked from a litter of average pups, is Felicity Huffman's newest single male. He now takes his walks on Wisteria Lane.

And then there's Lassie, a star in her own right, returning to the big screen in September and reviving an entertainment franchise that would make Tanner twitch his paws in his sleep.

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Jamie Rector for The New York Times

At Paws for Effect in California, Guin Dill coaches, from left, Casey, who was in "Desperate Housewives"; Sydney, who was in "Dude, Where's My Car?"; and Sherman, who can dance on his hind legs.

Hollywood has an animal side (not the one you think you know). Dogs, cats and "exotics" (mandrills, dolphins, yaks and others) work as career professionals. Tanner, Mr. Cruise's co-star, was not the dog next door. He has a powerful agent, Debbie Pearl of Paws for Effect, a talent agency and training ranch with offices in Los Angeles and New York. And he has a résumé of movie cameos and commercials. "Mission: Impossible III" was his breakout role.

Like other actors in the industry, animals have open calls and closed auditions, hair and makeup experts, special diets, red carpet appearances and retirement to a ranch. There are stars, unknowns, hopefuls and has-beens. There is hard work, and there is reward: chicken bits, in Lassie's case.

I met with Lassie at the Tribeca Film Festival this month.

The star made an onstage appearance with the director of "Lassie," Charles Sturridge, before a screening of the movie. Then she met the press, resting in the green room with her handlers — a trainer and a pack of publicists — posing for photographers and receiving reporters. With her mantle of ermine-white chest fur, brightened with tea tree oil shampoo, Lassie looked as poised as the Queen of England.

Hey Hey, the collie I met, was one of four dogs who played Lassie. Typically, animals are hired in teams to play a role. Birds & Animals Unlimited — the William Morris of animal talent agencies — supplied the collies, which among them provided the personality (close-ups), athleticism (stunts), high energy (reaction shots and spontaneity) and people skills (appearances) to portray the character.

Hey Hey, with Carol Riggins, her trainer, was doing Lassie's personal appearances, a five-month tour, which included introducing a new pet food, biscuit and treat line, Lassie Natural Way, and raising money at a charity event for Bide-a-Wee, the animal shelter. On tour Hey Hey drinks only distilled water. Bottled water, a stock item in many performers' contracts, is too regional and potentially upsetting to her system, Ms. Riggins said.

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