

# Vulnerable but versatile

With a sound conformation and character, the Smooth Collie can turn its paw to almost everything, which makes it such a surprise to see it struggling in the popularity stakes

By Sophie Harrison, Rough and Smooth Collie Training Association committee member

There is probably not a Smooth Collie owner in the country who has not been greeted by the comment "What a pretty dog – what cross is it?" With under a hundred puppies born each year in the UK it is hardly surprising that many people have never encountered a Smooth. Yet this Vulnerable Native Breed engenders a form of evangelism amongst those lucky enough to live with one, and is so adaptable that it is eminently well suited to the increasingly broad range of activities on offer to 21st century dog owners.

With one of the breed's greatest strengths being its versatile nature, many dogs share their time between the breed show ring, a variety of dog sports and the family sofa. Indeed, the first dog of any breed to be awarded both a show title and an Agility Warrant was Jean Tuck's Ch Dark Motif from Misstoff AW(G). In the UK, there are Smooths holding titles in a variety of disciplines: agility, rally, obedience – even Trick Titles!

The unexaggerated structure, play drive and natural athleticism of the Smooth appeals to handlers in a variety of dog sports and modern positive training methods help to bring out the best in this sensitive breed. Agility handlers are increasingly appreciating the Smooth's nimble, but careful, turn of foot and there have even been teams composed entirely of Smooths competing in Kennel Club agility competitions. In recent years Crufts has seen Joan Day's Sharidon Polly Flinders represent Scotland in the Inter Regional Obedience Competition, and Smooths have also been involved in the Genting Arena displays of canicross and obedience. The Smooth Collie obedience team has competed successfully in both the 2015 final and the current year's qualifying heats, with the dogs involved having a variety of activities to their name. The teams have included a show champion, a number of PAT dogs, dogs with Gold Good Citizen Dog Scheme awards, agility, rally and heelwork to music titles and even one dog that worked sheep at a hobby level. The versatility of the Smooth Collie is actively



Photo: ©Mrs E Vickery

Oakestelle Sebastian Bach, Seb, the PAT dog

encouraged by the Rough and Smooth Collie Training Association which has its own long-established versatility awards. To achieve an award, dogs collect points across a minimum number of different disciplines and the number of Smooths featured on the club's Roll of Honour is testament to the breed's adaptability.

The ability of the Smooth to turn its paw to so many disciplines is due in part to its sound physical construction (it is still very much 'fit for purpose') but is also down to its sweet temperament, high intelligence and trainability. When the trainers behind the world's pioneering project in Israel to develop a programme of Alzheimer's Aid Dogs were looking for a breed they had a complex list of requirements. They needed a breed that was trainable, with a good play drive and keen to work, without being overly active. A breed that was sensitive in its relationship with its handler but resilient enough to cope with unstable



Photos: ©Stephen Garofalo

Cownbred Finlay, Finn, a qualified search and rescue dog for the Rossendale and Pendle Mountain Rescue Team, pictured here showing the sort of terrain he works in

behaviour, mood changes and forgetfulness from that same handler. A breed that was healthy and easy to care for, with a low maintenance coat. After much research, they concluded that the only breed that suited their requirements was the Smooth Collie. Yariv Ben Yosef, founder of the Service and



Photo courtesy of Jean Tuck

Jean Tuck's Ch Dark Motif from Misstoff AW(G), the first dog of any breed to be awarded both a show title and an Agility Warrant

Therapy Dog Centre in Hod Hasharon, told the Jerusalem Report in 2009, "The Smooth Collie is an exceptionally stable dog, with a strong personality, but very sensitive to every subtle movement and mood of its owner." Many countries include the breed in their assistance dog programmes and in Israel alone over 30 Smooths have been trained to support a wide range of conditions including Alzheimer's, epilepsy, autism and PTSD.

Whilst the Smooth is not yet a common sight as an Assistance Dog in the UK, the breed's sound temperament can be seen by the considerable number working as PAT dogs in aged care facilities, hospices and schools. One remarkable PAT dog, Oakestelle Sebastian Bach spends time not only in the breed and rally rings but also visits a special needs school every week, supporting children suffering from conditions as diverse as paraplegia to non-verbal autism. Another exciting recent development has been the adoption by the organisation Support Dogs of its first ever Smooth, Blamorder Bubble Gum Chum. Hopefully he will qualify as an assistance dog for a sufferer of autism, epilepsy or a physical disability.

Perhaps the greatest current ambassador in the UK for the working abilities of the



Photo: ©Jason Bath

Seanua Sans Souci who captained the Smooth Collie obedience team in 2015 and will again this year 2017/18. She also competes in agility, rally and is a PAT dog

breed is Cownbred Finlay, Finn. A qualified search and rescue dog for the Rossendale and Pendle Mountain Rescue Team since 2011, Finn spends his life on the high fells of Cumbria with his owner Stephen Garofalo. Donated to the Mountain Rescue Team as a puppy, Finn embodies all that is wonderful in this breed. His lithe athleticism, work ethic and steady nature enable him to cope with a working life that includes being winched in and out of helicopters and scrambling in the mountains searching for the lost irrespective of the weather conditions, whilst his sweet nature also makes him an adored family pet. In 2016, Finn was awarded the Mary Hardy award for Outstanding Achievement by the Smooth Collie Club of Great Britain. ●

## The Smooth Collie as a vulnerable breed

By Isobel Griffiths

In my opinion the whole question of vulnerability lies in a lack of publicity. If you are not lucky enough to have excellent connections which make your breed instantly recognised by the general public, and if you cannot ensure that prospective exhibitors will have their breed widely known and appreciated in the show ring, then your two main markets for puppy sales are lost. So breeders don't have the incentive to produce litters (which they may not be able to sell readily) and registration figures suffer. A vast amount of work has been needed to change this situation, and I think that the Smooth Collie fraternity is aware of this, and has been working hard over the last few years to bring our breed to the attention of the general public.

Perhaps the fault goes back a very long way. Has there, I wonder, been a sense of exclusiveness in the minds of breeders in the past which has discouraged them from publicising the breed too widely in case it becomes too popular? Certainly many Smooth Collie puppy buyers express surprise that they were not aware of the breed a lot sooner.

Social media has certainly helped more than anything else to put our breed on the map, with many breeders and exhibitors, both at home and overseas, spending a great deal of time and effort with photographs, anecdotes and discussions, to introduce the Smooth Collie to a much wider audience.

Then there is the subject of health issues, which are always very much in everybody's mind. Members of the Smooth Collie Club of Great Britain, with a great deal of help, both advisory and financial, are taking advantage of current scientific research to ensure that any problems are eliminated from the breeding programme. This is a subject of great concern within the pet buying market, so everyone is making sure that our efforts are given as much publicity as possible through the club's magazine and puppy packs, as well as through the Smooth Collie stands at Discover Dogs which is one of our best ways of reaching the puppy market.

The Smooth Collie Club of GB is the only club in this country to cater solely for the Smooth Collie. Breeds which are fortunate enough to have a large following very often have a number of clubs all offering their members much the same thing, and a Breed Council to co-ordinate their activities and to speak on their behalf is very useful, particularly when it comes to health issues and conserving the breed. The Smooth Collie Club has always dealt with breed matters within its very active committee and its members. There are, of course, advantages in being part of a larger and stronger organisation such as a Breed Council, but there are also many difficulties. The club however continues to consider whether this would be in the best interest of the breed. ●