



Herd The Ones You Love

A tribute to Chase

BY NICK JANS

“YOU’RE GOING TO HOLD SAL, right?” Sherrie asks. I nod, and adjust my camera timer. It’s time for the annual us-and-dogs portrait that we send out as our holiday card. We’ve got our two rescues, Sal the hound and Loki, the terrier-heeler mix; plus Brisa, the senior crew boss—three great dogs, dressed in their Christmas collars, with a festive background. But there’s an unfillable spot, and we all know it.

Chase. For her sixteen and a half years, she was a force of nature. Sure, we all brag up our mutts, but Chase really was something: a through-and-through Alaska dog. Her life seems a procession of stories cast in bold-print capitals; but that’s the way she was. Never mind she weighed 34 pounds soaking wet. She saw herself as at least quadruple that size.

She was an Australian cattle dog, also called a Queensland heeler—a blend of two-thirds wild Dingo with various herding breeds; basically, a genetically tweaked, Down Under coyote. We met her by chance in an Anchorage mall pet store—one of a litter of pups in the window. I’ll admit, though, ever since a visit to Australia, where I’d seen those cow-herding work dogs dashing between horses’ legs and following whistled orders, I’d had a crush on the breed.

Sherrie proceeded to give the entire litter puppy tests, and the flop-eared female runt came out first. It was all theoretical, of course. We already had two dogs in Juneau, and we flew home to them. But Shaolin, Sherrie’s patriarch yellow Lab, was fading, and in the last months of a long life. His daughter, Dakotah, was about to be alone.

A Christmas portrait from 2011 of the Jans family: Chase, Sherrie, Brisa, Loki, and Nick.

I knew what Sherrie wouldn't admit to herself. We all needed that puppy, and fast. I didn't ask. A phone call and a plane ride, and there she was. The initial meeting seemed a huge success—the heeler pup alert, engaged, and cute; the Labs tolerant; Sherrie in love. The baby curled against her and slept quietly all that first night.

The next morning, we met the puppy from hell. Out for her first walk toward the glacier, Chase charged and took a swipe at the first person she saw: a big, bearded guy. He glared and swore at us, and at the snapping furball that barely came up to his shins. At home, it wasn't long before she was running the roost, deviling Dakotah and pestering Shaolin, brandishing her opinions in a variety of ways, from sharp nose bonks to our thighs to shrill, insistent barks. She delighted in dashing from bathrooms, trailing banners of toilet paper behind her, and stealing underwear. As a learner, she was hideously quick. Sherrie soon had her picking up and putting away toys in a basket, or raising a single paw skyward when asked "Who's been good?"

The real answer was seldom. With feral cunning, she serial-raided the kitchen garbage, and somehow pinned the rap on poor Dakotah. She once pilfered and scarfed down an entire pizza; another time, a turkey carcass; and three pounds of kibble from a duffle bag she unzipped with her teeth—all without the least twinge of conscience. If she'd had thumbs, nothing in the fridge would have been safe. Chase knew the deal we'd struck: She'd unconditionally agreed to herd us, and to consider input when she chose. She was the boss of the whole outfit—period.

Being a cattle dog, Chase demanded a job every waking moment. When we weren't hiking, we were skiing, biking, running, canoeing, boating, or driving somewhere; and Chase was either riding along, trotting at our heels, or loping ahead. She and Dakotah—and later on, Gus, Brisa, Sal, and Loki, in overlapping combinations—climbed mountains, swam icewater rivers, and porpoised through snow deeper than she was tall. Of course, we met plenty of wildlife, sometimes at point-blank range. Shockingly, Chase clung close and minded when it mattered. She once stood silent as a female black

bear and cub passed, just six feet away. Chase was also one of the few dogs on this planet who could claim to have shared social space—sometimes nose to nose—with a wild Alaska wolf. She knew Romeo, the 120-pound black wolf whose territory overlapped ours for six years. They sometimes sniffed and peed side by side, though the bond (from Chase's perspective, anyhow) could be best described as a frenemyship. If Romeo got too close to her herd, she let him know it. She once threw herself, teeth bared, between the too-excited wolf and our then-new cattle dog pup, Brisa. Squinting and apologetic, Romeo backed off.

Chase's most courageous moment came a decade later. We were mountain biking when Loki broke ranks and charged into a thicket, then burst out with a pair of irate black bears on his heels, 20 feet away from us and closing. Without hesitation, Chase launched a solo counter-charge that turned those bears. I'd call that her finest hour. She would probably tell you it was when she defended our boat against a 40-ton humpback whale that rolled right next to our gunwale (the whale would have its own version of the story). Fearless? Hardly. Every single time, Chase was terrified, yet ready to lay down her life to protect ours.

Beneath that prickly exterior hid a tender soul. Chase's black nose poked into every animal rescue we had over the years: many injured squirrels and birds, an orphan porcupine, and a newborn mink, among others. Like the others, Chase watched over the new baby mink while Sherrie bottle-fed him. Chance, as we named him, moved into our main floor bathroom, and grew into a force of nature of his own over the year we had him. He and Chase became friends, playing manic, roughhouse games.

Chase, the author's dog.



Despite the mink's razor toothed, nippy habits and Chase's much larger size, neither ever hurt the other.

Then there were Chase's exploits in canine agility (elaborate timed obstacle course competitions) from Alaska to Florida to California. She and Sherrie won top agility dog in her breed in 2006 at the AKC National Specialty show, and she was the first—and so far, only—Juneau dog ever to achieve an American Kennel Club MACH (Master Agility Championship). She scored her final needed points at age 12, deaf and half-blind, riding that same determination that had defined her life, framed by glaciers and bears.

And, when she finally left, body worn out but spirit intact, it was on her own terms, held by those she had herded and loved. May we all be so lucky. 🐾

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