

Excerpt from For the Love of a Dingo

DORA THE ADORABLE DINGO By Berenice Walters

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Dora Arrives

“Our very first Dingo arrived, it seemed, by accident. A gentleman wishing to purchase a Cattle Dog pup broached the subject of Dingoes and my efforts to have it recognised officially as native fauna.

He asked me if I would like a female pup, guaranteed pure bred, but no questions asked.

The incredible dream I had nurtured for so long looked like it could at last become a reality. I did not really believe that it could come true until she was actually handed over to me, a little fearful bundle of grey. I had told no one, not even my family. She was from the Barrington Tops region of the NSW tablelands, an area where winters can be very cold.

Dora was about 7 weeks of age when she arrived at our home. She was petrified of humans, and extremely cautious of everything, though she showed interest in the other dogs kennelled here, and they in her.

When I took her in my arms she tried to hide from the world by burying her head under my arm. As a baby she always did this when approached by strangers.

I first took her into the house and gently put her down on the floor, trying to reassure her continually with my voice. She flew into a dark corner under the lounge, petrified. Talking to her quietly, I gradually put my hand on her and carefully edged her to me. Although frantic with fear she did not attempt to bite though she squealed in alarm and growled.

When the family came home, each was speechless in horror. Then, "Mum! That's a Dingo! We'll all end up in gaol. Get rid of it."

My pup and I just clung together, instinctively knowing that we belonged together; that this was our destiny.

She was covered with a dense, blackish-fawn fur, her face black. She had little or no top coat. Her eyes were dark brown. Her skin was mostly a bluish-pink, the roof of her mouth dark like a Cattle Dog's, but the mouth as a whole appeared darker, almost blue. The coat near the skin was yellow on top of her back, but on her ribs and belly it was dark blue. Her stifles were longer and more rounded and lay of shoulder more angulated than the Cattle Dog's. Her frame was well boned, legs strong and feet round and deep padded with strong well-arched nails. She had a dark spot on her tail.

Comparing her to a Cattle Dog pup, their weights were similar, although the Cattle Dog pup's body was thicker.

The main difference was in the teeth. Her canines in particular were longer and sharper. This has remained a difference. Her eyes were almost black, almond in shape and set obliquely.



Dora Makes Friends

I took Dora out into the dog yards and carefully introduced her to the various Cattle Dogs through the fences. Fortunately, we had a litter of Cattle Dog pups about the same age, both reds and blues, and I was able to carefully integrate Dora into their enclosure. They were immediate friends. I noticed Dora was very careful not to take the initiative but followed the play and joined in.

As the pups got along so well and the Cattle Dog pups seemed to give Dora courage, it was decided to leave them together for the night. On that first night she seemed content in her enclosure shared with a blue pup, Juicy, and a red pup Sun Sally. When the pups were fed, the Cattle Dog pups tucked in and quickly had their fill; it was some weeks before Dora stood and ate a meal. She would eat a little, and then prowl round for a time, then return for a bit more, sometimes vigorously shaking it as if to 'kill' it. This behaviour is not restricted to the Dingo.

When she howled just on dusk and the other dogs joined in. I knew she was settling in, and that she was accepted.

Next morning I was over with the pups early. All was well. As soon as I entered the enclosure I was met by an avalanche of Cattle Dog pups. Dora was enthusiastic but kept slightly back. In the fourteen years we shared together, she never jumped up on me. At all times she treated me with the respect accorded to an alpha person, always approaching me with head and ears slightly lowered, her beautiful deep browns looking into me with love, loyalty and trust.

Up to at least six months of age she was never dominant or aggressive. When other humans approached, she dashed behind the kennel and peered out cautiously, always keeping other pups between herself and the stranger. Eventually she learned to stand her ground, head weaving slowly from side to side, taking in any new smells, and gradually making her way to the fence. After some weeks she would actually go to the fence and allow herself to be touched. I felt she regarded the fence as her protection as she was far less wary when the fence was between her and any stranger.

Dora's movements were more like those of a cat than a dog. She often put me in mind of a lioness. She could start off at an enormous speed, doubling up like a greyhound; head stretched out like an arrow. When she stopped suddenly she curved her body like a cat. Her hooded ears could rotate almost like a radar screen.

Training

Dora's education commenced immediately with lots of handling, cuddling, talking and play. As with Cattle Dog pups, I carried her away from home and unknown territory and put her down with lead attached. When I slowly moved forward, she followed closely as I represented security to her. She was one of the easiest pups to train to the lead, though I found myself soon put in the position of 'being led' as she took the lead in her mouth and walked ahead, leading me, her humour at this situation lighting up her whole face.

Imitating me became an important part of our relationship, as it seemed to give her a feeling of sharing and equality when she could sometimes take the initiative. However, it was always done in good humour, never dominance.

Dora, and her Cattle Dog playmates were walked and handled every day, but Dora was given additional socialisation to help her overcome her cautiousness. Every day she went out in

the car and gradually became more confident provided I was there with her. At all times I tried to anticipate any fears she may develop.

A Day Out

The first big day out for the pups was a visit to the vet, John O'Grady of Bowral, for their 'needles'. When I arrived at the surgery I put the three pups on the floor and shut the door. Then the vet came in. The two Cattle Dog pups just sat there, no doubt to get their bearings, but not Dora she disappeared into a small, upright box.

After carefully gathering her from the box into which she had fled, I placed her on the table with the Cattle Dog pups, and the three of them sat in a miserable little group. Dora was John's first Dingo patient and he was most interested to compare her with her mates. He noted also that her teeth were longer, sabre shaped, and very sharp.

Although the pups were very good, they were obviously relieved to get back to the safety of my car, especially Dora.

Growing Up

By the time she was three months of age, Dora's coat had undergone a dramatic change. The overall grey-black puppy fur was being replaced by a brilliant yellow top coat; the black mask was to remain a feature of her appearance until well in to maturity when it was replaced with grey hair. Her white socks and tail tip were always immaculately gleaming white.

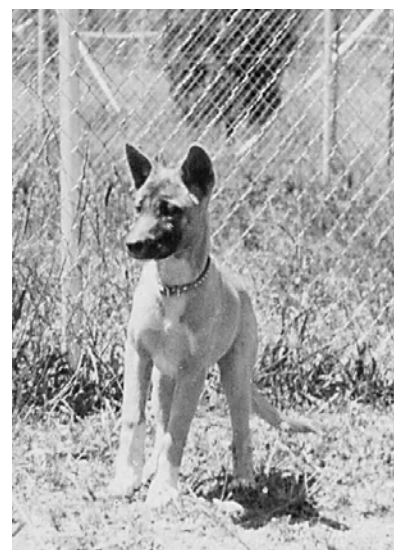
At this stage and right up to her death, Dora was very much my dog - or was I hers? She loved a little cuddle and always rushed up to me to play, but in everything she did she was so lady-like and respectful. Although defensive and seldom aggressive in her play, the constant daily routine of walking, training and socialising was helping her to adapt well in a variety of situations. She was even going to strangers, providing a fence separated them.

While the Cattle Dog pups loved to splash around in the water when I was hosing the kennels, Dora did not like to get wet, but occasionally gently pawed the water.

The Barkless One

One morning I had wormed Dora and her companions, and they were locked in their yard longer than usual. As I was cutting up their breakfast, I suddenly heard a gruff "woof". I rushed out and Dora repeated the "woof", a distinctive sound to attract my attention.

Within a week of this, she again barked, this time twice, only on this occasion it was a high pitched yap. On a third occasion a young boy was teasing her through the fence, pretending to be a dog, and she gave two excited "woof, woofs". In the first three months that we shared with Dora, these were the only occasions on which she barked.



I soon learned that although the Dingo is a relatively quiet animal except in the breeding season when their exuberance is expressed with excited 'singing', or howling, that the breed was capable of making a wide variety of vocal sounds.

Up till three months of age, Dora was almost silent. She had howled on only four occasions. It was so strange to see all the dogs standing at the fence first thing of a morning madly barking in excitement while Dora would just stand there, staring intently without a sound. When hurt during play, the pain would register on her face, but there was never a cry.

When she first heard the dogs barking, she was very curious, looking intently into their mouths. After being at our kennels about three weeks, she occasionally opened and shut her mouth as if she were barking, but still no sound. She would squeal at times, even growl. When hurt during play, the pain would register on her face, but there was never a cry.

A Big Girl Now

The Cattle Dog pups liked to play with me till I got tired of it. Dora enjoyed only a short play, but seemed to prefer the company of the other pups. I felt that I was tolerated but in a nice way. It rather reminded me of some children who, when they first start school, try to distance themselves from their parent in an effort to blend and be accepted.

At feeding time, Dora was never dominant over food. She would always move onto another plate if crowded. Of course she had never been really hungry.

Dora's agility was incredible. She was as nimble as a cat and could jump straight backwards or sideways as athletically as she could leap forwards. Many a time she would spring right over the pups to get to the other side of them instead of going round them, much to the amazement of the pups who thought she had disappeared.

Although Dora had an extremely thick and bear-like coat she had no apparent doggy odour. Occasionally we saw her lick herself clean like a cat and made a mental note to be careful in the use of insecticides.

At five months of age, Juicy was still a pup, but Dora was well grown and mature by comparison. I tried to fill her day as much as possible with outings in the car, short and companionable obedience training sessions and bush walks. The outgoing nature of Juicy was good for her and helped her to face up to the variety of new experiences to which I regularly introduced her. Basically her policy on life seemed to be "when in trouble, disappear", but with Juicy's influence she was becoming less cautious.

However, I was finding that the general over-cautiousness of the Dingo was having an adverse effect on Juicy. He was becoming much more wary than a normal Cattle Dog Pup and, as he appeared to be developing into a beautiful young dog, we just hoped that it would not affect his later show career. We were later to find that similar problems rose when an over-cautious Dingo pup was placed with well adjusted pups.

As Dora matured, the expression in her eyes had changed from that of an ever wary, frightened and insecure dog to that of a relaxed and loving friend. She was coming when called but cat like, in her own time. If she could find anything of interest on the way, then all the better. But she did obey.

She was also becoming very possessive of me. If I ignored her, she would gently nip my thigh. If I picked her up, Juicy would bite me, and he was not nearly so gentle.

Separation from Juicy

The first time we separated Dora and Juicy it was to take Juicy to a show. When we returned in the evening, I went straight to Dora to let her out of her pen and made a great a fuss of her so that she did not become jealous. She, however, rushed straight over to Juicy and knocked him down, menacing him. He rolled over in submission. On the second occasion we went to a show, Dora accepted being locked up as part of a routine and greeted Juicy on his return with joy.

Although Dora did not like to be touched by other people, she did become more confident with strangers provided they just simply ignored her. If anyone tried to befriend her before she had a chance to approve of them, she became very wary. If she was to be friends, then it had to be her decision and on her terms.

Aside from her many outings and sleeping, she would spend much time hunting in the long grass for lizards, grass hoppers etc.

She would stand motionless for ages, her back quivering, hind legs taking all the weight while her front legs would soundlessly and stealthily move forward. Almost imperceptibly she would transfer her weight to the forelegs. At the appropriate moment, she would suddenly pounce on whatever unfortunate creature she had been stalking, if there was indeed anything there. So often it seemed to be a game, perhaps in practice for a time when she just might have to rely on her skills to survive.

More Training

I had commenced her training as soon as she settled in, in order to strengthen my own position as the alpha, or leader. If she ignored me when I called her, I would carefully, and without her being aware of my action, lob a clot of mud near her. In apprehension, she would immediately come to me. At one stage this occurred so often that when I called her she would pause, waiting for the expected nearby thud. Whether it came or not, she then hurried to me, tail and ears carried low in submission. I was soon able to take her for walks off lead, or behind a horse, and she never strayed too far away. In fact, two years later I was able to work her on four hundred yard recalls for a television documentary in which she played the part of an apparently wild Dingo. I was also able to work her successfully in herding cattle.



By this stage Dora was already very independent. She always started off her training happily, but after the first couple of sits would growl. After the first few minutes of heeling, she would heel as far back as she could. After the mud tossing, when told to "come" on a recall, she always did, but in the slowest possible time. She had to examine every inch of the way.

Dora progressed well with her obedience training, heeling well, automatically sitting, doing stands, drops and stays. The very first time she sat automatically, in other words she obeyed me and acknowledged me as above her in the pecking order, she then immediately dropped in submission. When I finally got her out of that, she would no longer drop unless forced to. Then when we finally got that right, it was always accompanied by a growl which I totally ignored.

It always appeared to me that Dora relied more on her sense of smell than sight. When unsure, she would sniff the air, weaving her head from side to side and dropping her ears like verandahs, or rotating them in all directions to pick up any sound that may indicate a threat. Her nostrils would dilate as she moved her head, held high, from side to side. Sometimes, she would protrude her tongue as if using taste to back up her senses of scent, sight and hearing. If we were out in the car she would usually go to sleep, but invariably about twelve to fifteen miles from home, she would rouse and start sniffing what must have been familiar air.

Going for walks on lead was always great fun to her. She showed no resistance to heeling on lead and right from the start walked out freely beside me. I frequently took the three pups bush walking. Dora always stayed with her Cattle Dog friends, so that when they came to me on call, Dora followed suit so in this way was getting into the routine of coming when called.

A Dingo in the House

In the house she was full of mischief. Anything that could be pulled apart was. Juicy was as bad. If she found anything strange in the house, she would come to me and talk in a soft mmmm, mmm and take me to it. Dora loved to lie under the bed as if in a den and sometimes, much to her delight, I would crawl under with her. We would lie there, peeping out under the bedcovers, sharing a very special feeling of closeness. One day she discovered a box of mangoes under a bed and came rushing out to tell me about it. She surprised me by sharing one with me.

I will never forget the first time she saw herself in a full length mirror. She looked at her reflection and shyly moved forward, wagging her tail. Then she tried to get into the cupboard behind the mirror.

Juicy on the other hand tried to attack the other "dog". Hackles raised, he flew at what he took to be another dog (which of course did likewise) The whole room was thrown into disarray as he tried to find the intruder. The more frustrated and embarrassed he became at the incident the more determined he became. Unlike Dora who treated the reflection as a friend, Juicy growled every time he saw his reflection.

In the home or car Dora used to talk to me constantly. The only time she ever talked to me outside occurred when she saw two strange pups in her yard. Once she knew I was aware of their presence, she did not worry about them any longer and went about her play.

Dora was always very observant of everything that went on around her, quickly noting any change. She watched and worked out everything that I did. It did not take her long to realise that of an evening I went into the bedroom, and shortly after, the bed became warm. I had turned on the electric bed. Quietly, a short time later, we would chuckle to ourselves as she quietly slipped from the lounge room to curl up in the middle of the bed in a ball, or lay back, head on pillows, eyes large and dreamy till they slowly closed, only the oriental shaped slits visible.

I frequently took a hot bath rather than showering. Dora would usually come and peer in to see what I was doing, but this did not in any way prepare me for what I was to witness one day. On hearing strange rubbing and gentle scratching sounds coming from the bathroom, I crept to the door and peered through a crack. There was Dora on her back in the bathtub, no water of course, wriggling around as I had done so often. Then she got up and tinkered with the taps, took hold of the face washer and rubbed her cheeks on it. Then onto her back again 'splashing' around in utter enjoyment. She was doing exactly what 'the Boss' did.