



Lights.  
Camera.  
Action.



# Star Power

*It's time for your closeup,  
Mr. Spencer*

**By Denise Flaim**  
*The Ridgeback Register*



"Never work with animals or children," the great comedian W.C. Fields harrumphed.

Filmmaker Dan Margules didn't heed that crochety advice, which was a good thing for Spencer (Ch. Oakhurst Mountain Maverick, SC, NA, NAJ, VCD1, RN, CDX): The 6-year-old Ridgeback is the canine star of Margules' inaugural short film, "Begleiter."

"People always tell first-time filmmakers that dogs are hard to work with, but Spencer was very mellow," says Margules, whose canine inspiration for the 27-minute film was Oliver, his 11-year-old Australian shepherd/Lab mix.

While Oliver scored a cameo in the film, Margules didn't think he had the obedience chops for the lead role. He settled on Spencer for a variety of reasons, not the least of which was that his trainer had another black-masked Ridgeback who could act as a stand-in. (Indeed, Spencer's understudy, a bitch named Kelly, makes a couple of brief appearance in the film.)

Though he never researched the breed and was blissfully unaware of the Ridgeback's reputation for less-than-stellar obedience (a stereotype that Spencer defied), Margules says he hears constant comments about how well Spencer emotes. "Everyone says that when they see the film – 'How did you get the dog to express himself that way?'"

The film, which was shot in less than a week during the summer of 2004, gets its title from the German word for "companion." During production it took on the informal name "Happy the Dog," largely because, Margules

muses, no one could pronounce "Begleiter."

Whatever you want to call it, the narrative short film is inspired by Wim Wenders' 1987 "Der Himmel über Berlin" ("Wings of Desire,"), about an angel who yearns to be human – a wish that is finally granted.

In Margules' homage, that celestial being is replaced with Spencer's character, Happy, who quickly falls for the woman who adopts him. Marion (played by Aleisha Russell) is still carrying a torch for former boyfriend Nick (Brian Taraz), who suddenly reappears, as exes are wont to do, and Happy promptly becomes homeless. With the help of an other-worldly author played by Ken Osmond (you remember him through the mists of time as Eddie Haskell on "Leave It to Beaver"), dame and dog reunite, albeit as the same species.

"I'd always wanted to do something like 'Big' with a dog," Margules told his hometown paper the San Diego Union-Tribune, referring to the Tom Hanks movie about a boy's sudden transformation into a toy-company executive. "I thought: 'Well, what about a dog turning into a man?'"

Margules financed his film with the severance package from his software-engineering job. A former jazz critic, he persuaded drummer and percussionist Alphonse Mouzon, one-time member of the jazz-fusion band Weather Report, to compose the score.

That knack for improvisation surfaced at least once during filming, when – despite the careful choreography by four trainers and Spencer's owner, Maril Suess --

the canine cast members decided to rewrite the storyline.

"There's a kind of running theme that involves Happy sniffing things, and the smells kind of talk to us," Margules explains. But in the scene where Spencer meets a boxer on the beach and is supposed to greet him in the traditionally inquisitive canine way, the two dogs demurred. After all, they had worked together before, and were far beyond all the formality of a careful butt-sniffing.

"We have some very funny outtakes where we put a piece of liver under their tails," Margules admits, noting that the dogs failed to appreciate the ingenuity. Either they chomped instead of sniffed, or prodigious tail-wagging rendered the bait projectile.

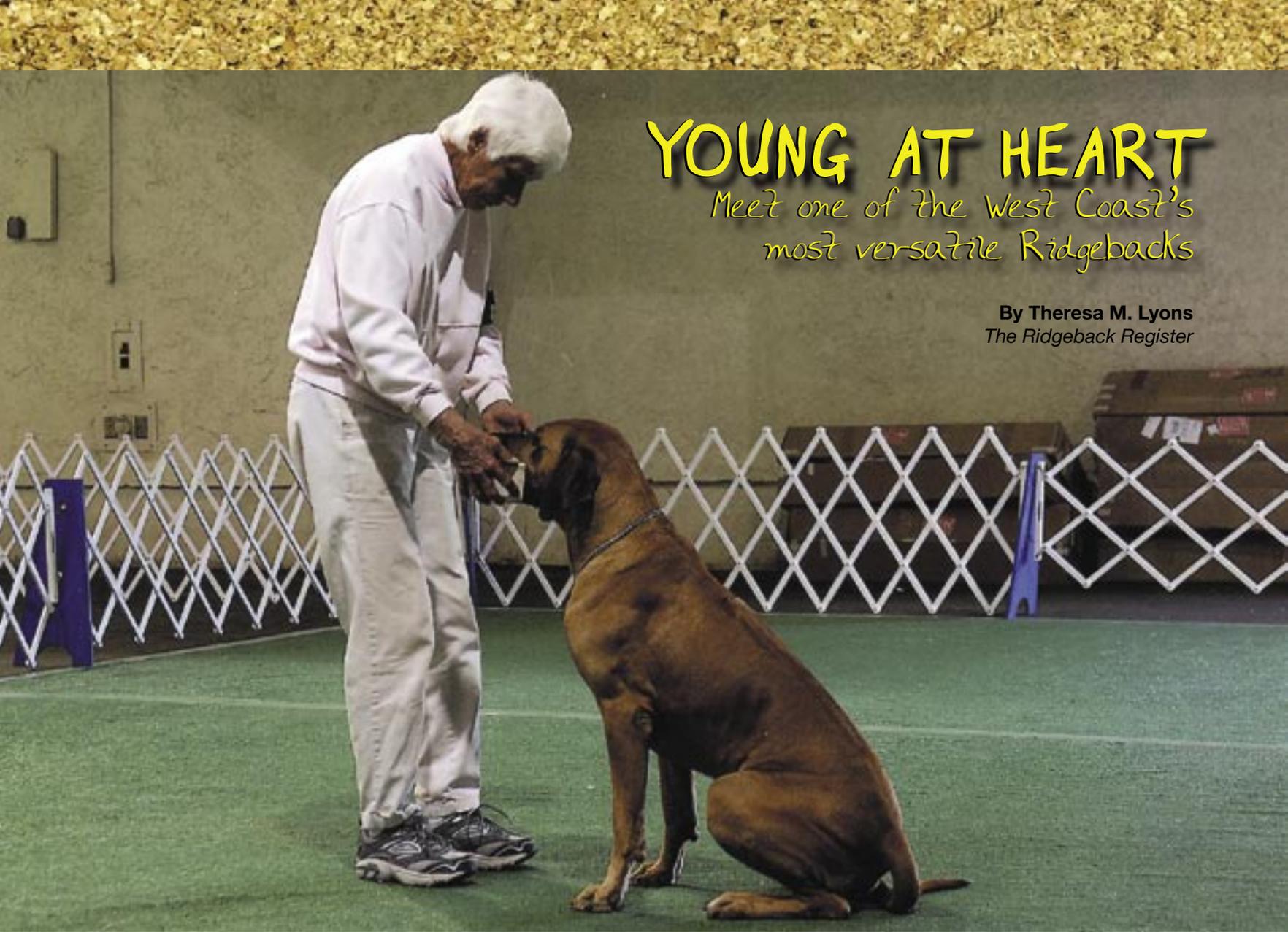
Such is the price of stardom, Spencer.

## Screen Savers

"Begleiter" premiered in Delray Beach, Fla., in mid-March, and has been screened at various film festivals in St. Paul, Minnesota; Anchorage, Alaska (where it won the Best Short award); Duncan, Okla., and San Diego.

A screening is planned on Friday, May 18, at 9:30 p.m. at the Ohana Theatre at the Big Island Film Festival in Waikoloa, Hawaii.

The film is not available for sale at this time, but check for updates at [www.happy-the-dog.com](http://www.happy-the-dog.com).



# YOUNG AT HEART

Meet one of the West Coast's  
most versatile Ridgebacks

By Theresa M. Lyons  
*The Ridgeback Register*

*Maril* Guess lives in a log cabin surrounded by the Cleveland National Forest and the mountains of San Diego County. Against that rustic California backdrop, her three Ridgebacks, two horses, two cats and a very vocal cockatiel live a life of luxury.

Maril rides her horses four or five times a week, always accompanied by her Ridgebacks. Her backyard's forest setting provides the dogs ample opportunity to pursue rabbits, squirrels, coyotes, and the occasional bobcat or fox. These frequent jaunts are a major part of the conditioning program for Spencer (Ch. Oakhurst Mountain Maverick, SC, VCD1, CDX, RN, ET, VC), and they are a workout that strengthen his bond with Maril. An enthusiastic camper with an "outgoing, magnetic personality," Spencer quickly attracts the admiration of nearby tent pitchers, Maril confides.

Maril met her first Ridgeback 25 years ago, at an equestrian camp. Smitten, she spoke at length with the owners, who referred her to Barbara Rupert of Oakhurst Rhodesian Ridgebacks. It did not take long before Maril purchased a puppy, and like most of us, her love for Ridgebacks continues to grow over the years.

Maril's first Ridgeback, Oakhurst's Urban Cowboy (aka Gillie), won High in Trial at the 1982 RRCUS National Specialty in Santa Barbara at Maril's first specialty show. So it is hardly surprising that she has taken Spencer, her third Ridgeback, to high mountains and beyond all expectations.

"When I purchased Spencer, his breeder recommended that if he 'turns out all right,' we must show him," Maril recalls. He obviously did, and quickly gained admirers along the way. Spencer finished his conformation championship at the heavily attended Palm

Springs shows by going Best of Winners, and then won Best of Breed the following day, defeating many deserving nationally ranked dogs, including his sire.

Maril says that while performance handling is her thing, the show ring is not. "I get too nervous," she explains. This is where Barbara Rupert and Spencer's friend, Jennifer Hakeem, come in.

"He is very masculine without being coarse," explains Barbara, a breeder-judge who has been in Ridgebacks for some 40 years. "He is a big dog -- however, balanced, with a pleasant head, expression and powerful gait."

To excel, a dog must not only be conformationally correct, but also sound in mind and body. "His disposition and willingness to work please me. He has no issues with other dogs, people or kids," says Maril of her



*Spencer, with breeder-owner-handler Barbara Rupert, finishing his championship.*

registered therapy dog, who has been going on his weekly visits for the last four years.

Training for all his events includes classes, matches, sessions and shows, and is time consuming to say the least. Demanding equal time are her two other Ridgebacks, which Maril devotes just as much time to with obedience, agility and coursing events.

### ■ *Ridgeback, heel thyself!*

Obedience requires the most time for Spencer and his son Chase, with four to five classes per week. Sessions last around 15 to 30 minutes each. To get ready for competition, which she does about five times a year, Maril has several active steps:



*Spencer and Maril winning the 2006 RRCUS National Specialty Obedience High in Trial.*

1) **Teaching phase.** During this stage, the dog is taught the fundamentals of each exercise, all of which are broken down into small parts. Much motivation and reassuring are done. When the small parts are understood, the exercise is put together.

2) **Correction phase.** Corrections are given when and only if the dog understands what he is expected to do.

3) **Proofing stage.** Distractions are added to build confidence.

These techniques, along with the guidance of obedience mentors Catherine Zinsky and Betty Fisher, have given Spencer the ability to compete in tough competition. He has earned some wonderful wins, including High in Obedience Trial at the 2006 RRCUS National Specialty in Utah.

### ■ *Agile paws*

While training for Agility is more exciting than Obedience, it takes commitment and consistency to become competitive.

Maril belongs to the San Diego Agility Club. Now in the advanced level, Spencer attends class once a week. "The trainers do a great job stressing safety: Start the dogs out slowly while stressing a positive attitude toward both the handler and the dog," Maril says, noting that the positive methods underscored by trainers Rita Uaiokwiz and Patti Bott have made their experience even more enjoyable. Maril believes that the great care that is taken in teaching the dogs to handle the various equipment and building confidence has helped them excel.

Because it is difficult to compete with versatility dogs, Maril has only competed with Spencer in agility six times, but says that she will continue

to do agility when time permits. Again, one of her most memorable moments was a National Specialty win: Spencer took first place in jumpers and weavers at the 2004 RRCUS National in Texas. While not a high in trial, Maril cherishes the memory.



*Spencer in his first coursing event, the OCRRC Regional Specialty, where he went Best in Field.*

### ■ *Run, Spencer, run*

Another moment she treasures is winning Best in Field at the Orange Coast Rhodesian Ridgeback Club Specialty Coursing event, at Spencer's very first trial.

Due to time restraints and an obviously busy schedule, she does not oval- or straight-race and only participates in AKC coursing events.

"I have two horses, am an avid rider and must make room for them," Maril says, so when there are time issues, Maril chooses to spend it with her other animals.

### ■ *A sniff in time*

Spencer also competes in Tracking and has a TD title. "This, and obedience, are my favorite events," says Maril. She loves the challenge of obedience, but believes that tracking is a great experience for both handler and dog working together in the open field. "The dog is in charge, and the handler is following and watching him use his natural instincts."

While he can be very mellow, Spencer is also a loyal protector of the homestead, and is an "all around family dog," says Maril, who has found Ridgebacks to be intelligent, independent and good with people. She says she has been fortunate to meet Ridgebackers who have encouraged her in showing and working with all of her dogs.



*"Air Spencer" demonstrating his agility.*

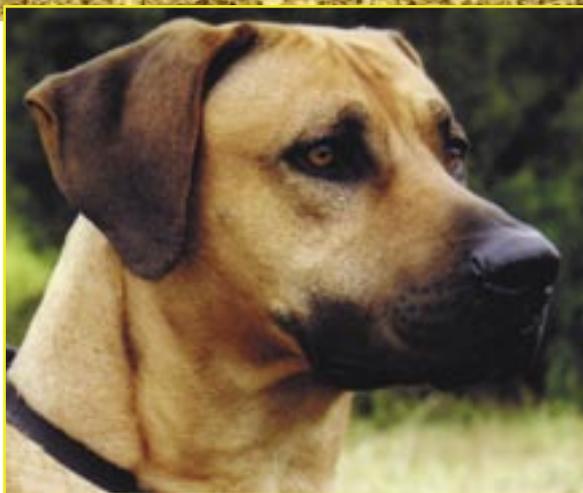
She especially wants to mention the helping hands of Barbara Rupert, and Sandy and Troy Abney. She also believes that belonging to a breed club is not only fun, but rewarding and informative.

For Maril, the greatest reward is having Spencer in her life. He is a great companion, and frequently travels with her. "Spencer is a great ambassador for our breed on all levels," she says.

Spencer, now seven and Maril ...well, let's just say a veteran herself ... have proven that while a Ridgeback must have heart to achieve successes, it is the dedication of his caretaker that makes it all possible.

Does Meril realizes that she too is a true ambassador of the breed?

*The Ridgeback Register would like to thank Jennifer Hakeem, Barbara Rupert and Deborah Adams for contributing to this article.*



*Spencer takes any job given very seriously. He always has his eye on the target.*

*Early risers. Spencer and Maril get an early start at tracking training.*



## In a Word

*When both breeder Barbara Rupert and handler Jennifer Hakeem were asked for a single word to describe their friend Maril Suess, they both arrive at the same one:*

### Tenacious.

"It was hard for me to come up with just *one* word for Maril," admits Jennifer, whose other thoughts were devoted, determined, dedicated, patient, easygoing, resilient and proud. "Not many people have the time, let alone the patience, to train a Ridgeback in so many different skills."

A few years ago, Jennifer recalls, Maril had an accident while riding her horse with Spencer and her bitch Riley. A pitbull appeared and tried to attack the horse. Maril was bucked off, laid on the ground unconscious until

neighbors rescued her, and suffered a concussion and broken bones.

But as soon as she was out of the hospital, Maril was riding and training her Ridgebacks again.

"That just says it all about her - she is in her 70s, and she does all this," Jennifer says. "She is so proud of Spencer, but she isn't the kind of person that broadcasts all his accomplishments."

Happily, she has friends who are happy to do it for her.

## Fast Facts

### Registered name:

Ch. Oakhurst Mountain Maverick, SC, VCD1, CDX, SC, RN, ET, VC

**Call name:** Spencer

**Whelped:** May 19, 2000

### Health screenings:

OFA Hips Good / OFA Elbows Normal

**Sire:** MBIS Ch. Oakhurst WGASA Morgan Run, ROM

**Dam:** Ch. Oakhurst's Autumn Splendor

**Breeder:** Barbara G. Rupert, Oakhurst Ridgebacks

**Owners:** Maril Suess and Barbara G. Rupert

**Handlers:** Maril Suess (Performance), Barbara Rupert and Jennifer Hakeem (Conformation)

### Accomplishments:

- VCD1 (includes obedience, agility, tracking). **First Ridgeback to earn this AKC award!**
- Registered working therapy dog
- 2006 #3 Ridgeback (RRCUS Obedience)
- 2003 Best of Breed Coursing – Orange Coast Rhodesian Ridgeback Club Regional Specialty



*Spencer and his get relaxing in the California sun.*

### Future goals:

Spencer will continue his therapy work and will be working toward a Utility and Tracking Excellent title. Spencer is seven years old and Maril is hoping that he will "impart some of his wisdom" to his son, Chance, which is already evident in his training.