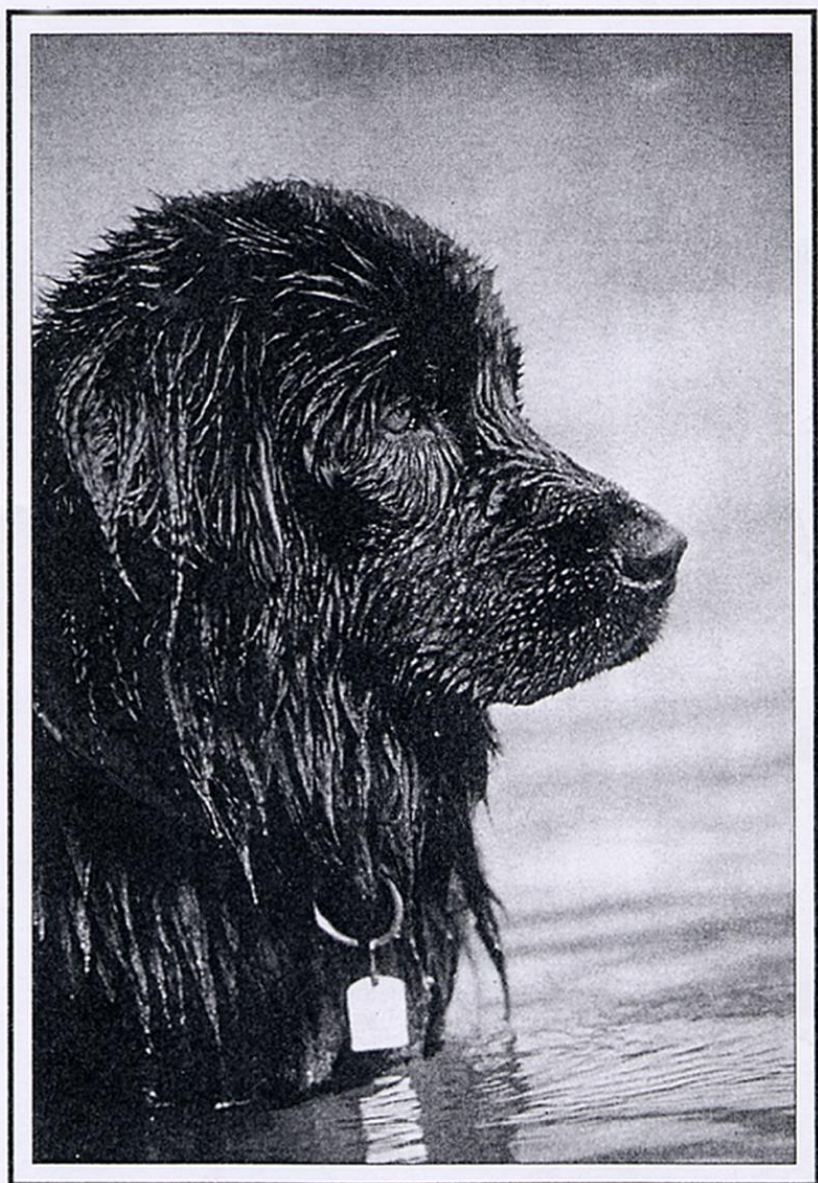


DOGS WITH JOBS

WORKING DOGS AROUND THE WORLD



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BRIVIO, ITALY

MAS

It's warm and clear on the shores of the Ligurian Riviera and Mas, a big black Newfoundland, takes a break from her patrol to sneak a sniff at the fishermen's morning catch. Further out on the ocean, fierce winds from the Gulf of Tigullio have begun to lift and swirl the surface of the sea, but the beach remains calm.

Mas and her inseparable companion, Ferruccio, scan the horizon and observe a fleet of multicolored sailboats heading toward port. Instinctively, both focus on one fifteen-foot boat desperately struggling to maneuver upwind. Turbulence and rough waters thwart the inexperienced sailor's attempts to dock, forcing the boat toward the sharp rocks on the wrong side of the breakwater. The crew scrambles to set the sail, but Ferruccio can see they are not going to make it. He quickly clambers along the slippery rocks to the end of the jetty, Mas close on his heels, barking excitedly. The pair work their way to the farthest, safest launch point, and leap into the angry waves.

Momentarily disoriented in the pounding surf, Ferruccio reaches out for Mas. At the feel of her master's hand, the enormous black dog sets out swimming strongly, clearing a path through the waves to the floundering craft.

Newfoundlands are dogs of the sea, equally at home on land or in water. In the Canadian coastal province from which they take their name, they were the constant companions of fishermen who wouldn't leave port without them. The dogs pulled heavy fishing nets out to sea, hauled carts filled with the day's catch, and rescued drowning seamen. In heavy seas, they proved invaluable for carrying the mooring lines to land and pulling heaving boats to safety.

Descended from the Tibetan mastiff, the Newfoundland crossed the Bering Strait during the late Ice Age with North America's original settlers. Archaeological remains show that the Newfoundland's forebears worked as sled and water dogs alongside Native Americans many centuries before John Cabot's exploration introduced European dogs into their gene pool.

The European continent "discovered" Newfoundlands in the nineteenth century. In an inscription on his dog's monument, Lord Byron immortalized his Newfoundland, Boatswain, "who possessed beauty without vanity, strength without insolence, courage without ferocity, and all the virtues of man without his vices." In France, the breed was used to patrol the river Seine in Paris.

Most Newfoundlands' coats are a deep, rich black. Other color combinations—Irish setter brown, charcoal gray, and the black-and-white combination known as the Landseer, named for the painting of a Newfoundland by the English Romantic artist Sir Edwin Landseer—are the result of cross-breeding with European dogs brought by the first colonists.

Newfoundlands are large and powerful enough to pull a man or boat to safety. Females stand twenty-five inches at the shoulder and weigh 115 pounds. The male stands around twenty-eight inches at the shoulder and weighs 150 pounds. In addition to their great strength, size, and endurance, Newfoundlands possess additional physical attributes that make them excellent water dogs: webbed paws, with a highly developed membrane between the toes to give their powerful swimming stroke an extra boost; a muscled tail, to provide a strong rudder; and a water-resistant double coat, fine underneath and shaggy and oily on top, to keep them warm and dry. So endowed, the Newfoundland can survive icy water rescues that might prove fatal to other breeds.

A Day at the Beach

Eleven-year-old Mas pokes her broad, good-natured face out from under the large kitchen table that barely conceals her massive bulk. Gently but persistently, she nudges Ferruccio for a share of his brioche. After a decade in the family, Mas, the matriarch, has a privileged position. Ferruccio chuckles softly. Dakota, the junior at seven years old, waits politely for her share of the sweet breakfast roll. The two highly trained water rescue Newfoundlands have settled comfortably into family life with Ferruccio, his wife, Elsa, and their daughter, Valentina. "When we go somewhere, they come with us," says Ferruccio. "When we go to the cinema, they come along. We would like to visit England and Scotland, but until they lift the quarantine, we won't go, because we won't leave Mas and Dakota behind."

Ferruccio bought Mas from a breeder in Bergamo when she was just a two-month-old ball of black fluff. In his work as a volunteer firefighter, he had met rescue dogs and was impressed by the legends of the Newfoundland's exploits, and by their gentleness, courage, and enormous strength. Even as a



puppy, Mas showed the great rescue instinct and enormous desire to work inherent in her breed.

"Come on, Mas, let's get in the car, we're going to the lake," Ferruccio calls. At the sound of these magic words, Mas knows it's a work day. She rushes to the door, almost taking the table with her.

The family squeezes into their Opel station wagon stuffed with rescue gear, harnesses, wet suits, fins, life jackets, and backpacks. In 1989, Ferruccio Pilenga inaugurated the first Italian school for canine lifeguards, Scola Cani Salvataggio. He and his canine inspiration, Mas, teach and train dogs and handlers for nautical rescue. In addition to the standard rescues, they have perfected a unique canine helicopter rescue technique for inaccessible, heavy seas. Every weekend, under the expert guidance of Mas and Ferruccio, eager disciples hone their dogs' lifesaving skills and instincts. Today's drive to Brivio, on the river Adda, will take an hour, just enough time to rehearse the training schedule and make the final cell phone arrangements for boat and helicopter transport.

Fifty dog and handler teams are waiting to greet them at the river's edge, instructors dressed in red T-shirts and caps, pupils in blue. Mas's silhouette, the icon of the school, is emblazoned on all the gear.

Sixty yards offshore, a lone swimmer simulates distress and cries for help. Caught in the violent current of the Alpine river, his head bobs up and down as he fights for air.

The thrashing swimmer kick-starts Mas's rescue instinct, beginning today's training exercises. The charge of adrenaline washes away her advanced years. No longer is Mas Ferruccio's favorite "old lady." She barks energetically and strains toward the river.

On the embankment, a training group of seven massive Newfoundlands whimpers and squirms in puzzlement, looking at their handlers and each other, uncertain what is expected of them. Mas surges toward them, dragging her teammate, Ferruccio, behind. She assumes her place of command at the water's edge and, barking wildly, rears up on her hind legs and pulls toward the swiftly moving waters.

Mas's infectious enthusiasm inspires the other dogs and, one by one, the confused pupils begin to bark. Loud yips and yelps soon reverberate along the riverbank as the novices take their cue from the old veteran and focus on the struggling swimmer.

With a great leap, Mas hurls herself into the fast-flowing water, Ferruccio close behind. The weight of her body pulls her under but she quickly resurfaces, nose first. Head held high, she checks for her partner, then powers through the waves to the drowning man. Avoiding direct contact, she slowly circles the exhausted victim, a technique she and Ferruccio developed. "It has," Ferruccio explains, "a calming and tranquilizing effect."

Gratefully, the swimmer grabs on to Mas's red-and-yellow harness. Ferruccio quickly joins them, rolls the weakened victim onto his back, and hooks his arm over the man's gasping chest and under his armpit in a secure lifesav-

ing hold. If the victim had been unconscious, Mas would have taken his hand or wrist gently in her mouth and begun towing. Now Ferruccio supports the man's head above water, taking over his grasp on Mas's harness. Buoyed by the towline, Ferruccio can reassure the victim or immediately start artificial respiration if needed. Without the help of a dog, precious lifesaving moments are lost and a drowning swimmer can lapse into a coma in the water before onshore resuscitation is initiated. "We're a team," thinks Ferruccio, feeling the power of Mas's strokes, "and when it comes to water rescue, two is better than one. Having a friend to count on is very important."

Confidently and powerfully, Mas tows her two charges to shore.

Ferruccio pulls the swimmer out of the river, the "victim" dons his school sweatshirt, and Ferruccio pats and cuddles his favorite bundle of wet fur. The assembled students clap in appreciation. Yapping short sharp barks of pleasure, Mas romps and rolls on the embankment like a puppy, basking in the purest, most perfect reward she knows—praise and affection from her owner. Ferruccio's wet suit is put to the test as she returns his affection with slobbery Newfie kisses of undying love.

Now it's Elsa's turn to slip into the water upstream. She swims forty yards out and begins struggling and crying for help. As a further test of their rescue instincts, the future lifeguards are lined up on shore—this time without Mas's motivating presence. As they watch Elsa flailing, initial consternation and puzzlement gradually give way to one isolated bark, then another. Sheer pandemonium soon breaks loose as the assembled Newfoundlands strain and pull, yelping and barking, all rescue instincts on full alert. Their handlers jump into the water and, inspired by regal Mas's example, the younger dogs enthusiastically follow suit. "Mas has a lot of energy, which she transmits to the other dogs," Ferruccio says. "They see her leaping without fear, and even dogs that hesitate will dive from the pier." Ferruccio calls this "imitative learning" and it is an integral part of his school's innovative methodology.

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The history of Italian water rescue is the history of Mas and Ferruccio, and the core of their school is the bond and trust between them. "We base everything on the teamwork between the dog and its master," Ferruccio emphasizes. "We teach teams various intervention techniques, how to swim together in perfect harmony, and how to help each other in turn." His water rescue school is the only one in the world to pair dogs routinely with their handlers in the water. The French and Swiss schools use a different method, sending their dogs into water rescues alone. These schools first teach the dogs to retrieve objects in the water, then to retrieve people. "But in our school," Ferruccio says with a laugh, "we throw the dog's owner into the water first. Our dogs don't do anything their owners don't do first and so trust is built."

Mas achieved the highest French, Swiss, and Italian water rescue certifications by performing progressively difficult aquatic feats: diving off high piers; rescuing a drowning person in breakers on a rocky shore; swimming a mile to a drowning victim and towing him to safety; towing master and victim aboard a boat to shore; and riding a floating object to perform a rescue independently. Mas's ultimate trial was in Venice, in 1989. The skeptical Italian coast guard agreed to test the young Newfoundland's lifesaving abilities. Unlike France and Switzerland, Italy had never used dogs as part of its water rescue program. As a coast guard volunteer simulated drowning, Mas courageously leapt from a rocking motorboat straight into water rescue history. This daring feat earned her an official water rescue accreditation from both the coast guard and the harbormaster. Mas became the first dog ever to achieve this honor in all of Italy. "But it was the inaugural helicopter rescue Mas performed for our school's highest certification that heralded a different type of work," says Ferruccio.

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Teachers and pupils watch the sky above the Adda as a helicopter swings low over the swiftly moving mountain river. Mas barks expectantly from the bank. The next training stage is the hardest, but it is also her favorite.

A "victim" enters the strong current and swims out into the river.

The roar of the helicopter is enough to terrify most dogs, but, from the beginning, Mas reveled in this experimental form of water rescue.

"We followed orders from the police pilot," Ferruccio remembers. "Mas climbed in and out of the helicopter with the motor off a few times. Then we stayed aboard and they started the engine. She quickly got used to the din, and the noise of the running motor became part of the game for her." In many situations, boats cannot quickly reach the scene of water emergencies, and helicopters offer the speediest solution. "The first time, the dogs just fly in the helicopter. They don't jump, only their masters do, so we don't traumatize them with the helicopter," Ferruccio explains. "We must teach them step by step. If the dog is fine flying, the following time they can dive."

Before Mas and Ferruccio came along, canine helicopter water rescues had never been attempted.

Now the whirring blades add to Mas's excitement. Waiting on shore, she barks wildly at the sight of the swimmer struggling in the river and at the sound of the landing helicopter, two compelling calls to action. Keyed up, but with the utmost control, she boards. The helicopter is small and any undisciplined movements could put them all in jeopardy. With her long black coat brushed by the wind and her muzzle lifted to the sky, Mas fully enjoys the exhilarating ride.

The helicopter banks sharply, positions itself, and hovers six feet above the swimmer below.

Mas readies herself in the jump position on the special anti-slip carpet. Her muscled hindquarters bunch for maximum momentum. Undeterred by

the spray, wind, and choppy waters, she launches herself out of the hovering helicopter and into the churning river below. Her heavy body and head submerge completely. Then she pops up, her first thought for Ferruccio, who has jumped in, straight-legged, behind her. Other dogs jump in after their handlers but, as always, Mas leads the way. As soon as she locates her master, she swims to his side. Together, they stroke toward the thrashing victim.

When Mas and Ferruccio first started experimenting with helicopter water rescue, Ferruccio used a cable winch to lower them together into the water, judging it the safest technique. Then one day they were assigned to a helicopter without a cable. Ferruccio's commander friend suggested that the pair dive directly from the helicopter. That first free fall was Ferruccio's most moving moment with Mas.

"We were alone and there wasn't anyone to help us. The dive was from a high altitude, nine to twelve feet. Mas was fantastic. She jumped out before I did without hesitating her first time. She demonstrated that it was possible to do it."

Back on shore, a new crop of dogs learns to approach the deafening helicopter. Ferruccio observes them closely, knowing there is a secret about Mas that none of the others knows. Her old body is now arthritic. The fearless dog that helped him appreciate the incredible potential of rescue dogs can now barely walk up steps. Yet, in the water, she is rejuvenated. "When it comes to training and it's time to work, Mas has amazing energy, even if she has passed her ten-year mark," Ferruccio says. She no longer works as a lifeguard, patrolling the beaches and shores of Italy. Mas is a teacher now. But Ferruccio will never forget her days on active duty and the lives she saved, especially that day in the stormy surf off the Ligurian coast.

Mas was already waiting for him in the water when Ferruccio surfaced. The waves were high and he was glad to have her by his side as they swam



together toward the wind-tossed sailboat. He knew Mas could handle the surf, but the young sailors could not. They were scared and panicky, futilely attempting to set the sails and start their outboard motor. On one side, the sailors saw the looming, jagged rocks; on the other, a man in a red wet suit with an enormous black dog leading him through the waves.

Mas swam toward them with strong, efficient strokes.

Ferruccio remembers shouting, "Throw the line to the dog," using all his might to yell above the swell.

Frustratingly, the young men hesitated, terrified to throw away their life-line to a dog.

"Trust her, trust her," he screamed, pointing to Mas circling in the rough breaking waves.

Finally, with no choice but the sharp limestone or the dog, the frightened sailors tossed the rope in Mas's direction. The bowline arced high, landing close to the big Newfoundland. Fighting the lashing breakers, Mas pounced and clamped the line securely in her strong jaws. Relieved, Ferruccio signaled her to swim out to the open sea. Reaching deep with her large paws, Mas pulled powerfully away from the rocks. Slowly, the boat spun about and, to the amazement of the frightened sailors, buffeting winds filled the sails. The mast creaked and the sailboat shot off toward safe, open water.

Ferruccio is still thinking of Mas's past glory as the helicopter blades whir and young four-legged trainees happily throw themselves into the green waters of the river Adda. Now Mas's strong desire to save lives blossoms in new generations of Newfoundlands groomed for water rescue. Ferruccio smiles to himself to see her very important role continue. In the years to come, Mas's students will grow more numerous, an extended pack of aquatic rescuers ready to assure the safety of all the major ports and beaches of Italy. They will carry on her pioneering spirit, soaring above the waters—courageous Newfoundlands, dogs of the sea and of the air.