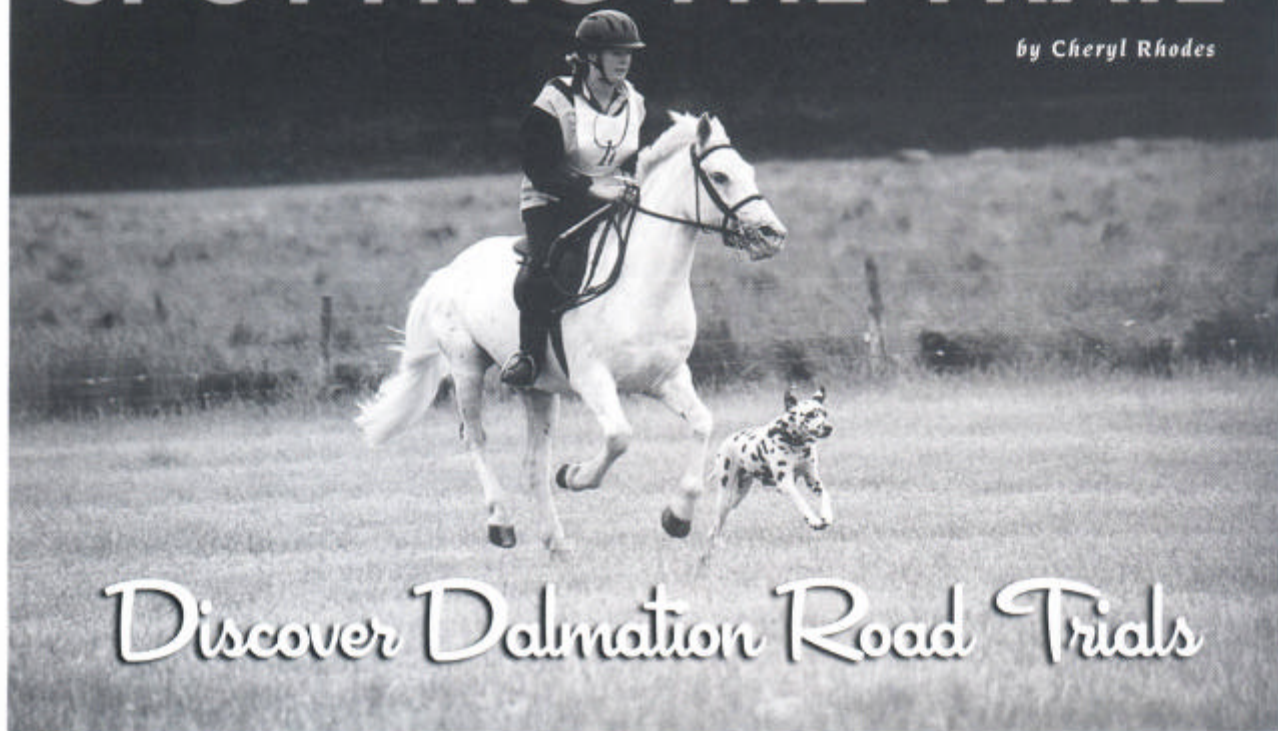


SPOTTING THE TRAIL

by Cheryl Rhodes



Discover Dalmatian Road Trials

Don't look for Dalmatian road trials to be held on the street, with horses and spotted dogs dodging traffic. Instead, this team is more likely to be spotted running across state parks, private farms, or even a military base. While competitors say Quarter Horses and Arabs are the best fit for road trials, judges are not grading the horses in this throwback to the centuries-old tradition of working Dalmatian dogs and horses together.

Road trials test the skill of the Dalmatian in several exercises while it accompanies either a horse and rider or a carriage, receiving scores in nine different areas:

- Pre-course soundness test
- Recall, hock
- Distraction
- Long sit or down
- Mid-course soundness
- Speed
- After-course soundness
- Finishing the course within the time limit.

These exercises test the Dalmatian's skill at remaining close to the horse and rider; its ability to obey the handler's commands, and its speed at keeping pace with a galloping horse. To compete in a road trial, the Dalmatian must be extremely obedient and be trained to stay with its handler under various conditions, including bad weather, loud noises, and among other animals.

Veterinary checks are held before the race and throughout the course to ensure the animals are in sound condition at all locations; any horse or dog that is not sound will be excused from completing the race. A handler is given three hours to complete 12.5 miles, or six hours for the 25-mile endurance ride. In

order to complete the race in the allotted time the horse/rider/dog teams will trot most of the way, meaning that all three must be in good physical shape. To prepare, competitors usually condition their horse and canine together daily, starting out trotting a mile the first week and then adding an extra mile for subsequent weeks.

The revival of Dalmatian road trials has been in large part due to Dalmatian clubs across North America. Unfortunately, local clubs may only hold one road trial before canceling future events due to a shortage of competitors who own both Dalmatians and horses. Most Dalmatian owners live in the suburbs, where it is impossible to keep a horse in the



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backyard and often expensive to board within city limits. However, the rules permit rental horses, opening the playing field for more competitors. Judges are more lenient to mistakes made by the rental horses, such as refusal to change gaits from trot to gallop for the speed portion, and this won't affect the dog's score.

The Dalmatian Club of America announces several road trials each year on its web page (www.dca.org). The competition is not limited to show quality, registered Dalmatians; any horse-loving Dalmatian owner is encouraged to compete. Looking to the future, there may be changes to the American Kennel Club rules that will allow all dog breeds to compete in road trials. A great source for more information on Dalmatian road trials is the Brylin Stables and Kennels website (www.brylinstables.com), with links and training articles. The complete rules and regulations can be found on the Dalmatian Club's website at www.thedca.org/roadtrial.html. ❖

Cheryl Rhodes is the author of "Recipes My Mother Forgot...Family Style Cooking and a Caregiver's Guide to Alzheimer's Disease." She has published travel, dog, and country living articles, as well as numerous equine articles.

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