

Working with Fred “The Star” Dachshund on LITHIUM SPRINGS

By Carter Lord:

Working with Fred “The Star” Dachshund

We got Fred from a breeder in Tampa after he was already a year old. He had lived in a cage almost his entire life and had hardly ever been touched by humans. He had been well taken care of but it was a busy place and he just hadn't had any real physical contact with anyone. He was shy, needy, a little scared and insecure. He was definitely in need of love. We poured it to him.

Between us, our teenage kids, their friends, and the kids in the neighborhood, Fred suddenly was smothered with physical contact - hugging, laughing, joking, running, and chasing around playing games.

He also suddenly had unlimited exercise as we live at the end of a dead end road next to a 30 acre home and cow pasture that belongs to my father. This allowed Fred to run, explore, roam and lay around unfettered to his heart's content.

It wasn't long before Fred came out of his shell and matured into the kind, friendly, relaxed, inquisitive, intuitive and tough character we were hopefully able to capture in his debut role in our independent feature film Lithium Springs, a performance that Fred himself told me he thinks is "the greatest performance by a dachshund in the history of American cinema."

In the spring of 1999, after two years preparation, we began principal photography on Lithium Springs; our independent Florida comedy adventure film that I am happy to say has become highly acclaimed around the United States and has just become available to the general public for the first time at <http://www.lithiumsprings.com>. Using the latest mini-DV computer technology available at that time, we filmed over a 9 month period, mostly on weekends but always with only a 3 man crew - an unheard of reality that taxed us to our ultimate limits. Fred accompanied us every step of the way.

Fred the Great (as he came to be called on the set) is one of, if not THE main character in the movie, and as such is somewhere in almost every scene. That meant he had to always be with us and he had to be more or less ready to go.

At the beginning of the filming, he seemed a little scared of the camera. When we would go in for his close-ups, and had to point the camera directly at him, he would shrink back and look scared. He would go flat. Once he became used to the camera, however, he became very camera friendly. Generally, our technique was to talk with him while we were filming and laugh about what we were doing. It didn't take long until he seemed to get right into the flow of things and we were able to capture his essence fully in a very relaxed and spontaneous manner.

Working with Fred “The Star” Dachshund on LITHIUM SPRINGS

In film, there are always physical limits within which you shoot a scene. As much as possible, you try to work out the moves of everyone in rehearsals so the camera operator can follow the action and you can repeat the same action over and over until the scene is "covered". Everything is planned in advance as much as possible.

This is hard enough for humans, communicating in a language we all more or less agree we understand. This reality of repeating the same action over and over again but with freshness, newness and spontaneity every time is one of the hardest parts of filmmaking. It takes a long time and a lot of energy and expense to set up the situation and get everybody ready to go. Then the actors have to come in and deliver their performances with spontaneity and strength but also efficiently and in a timely manner. It seems easy but it isn't and it is one of the reasons that famous actors get paid all that money. If they fool around and can't get the job done, having to shoot the scene over and over again, it costs a fortune and can bankrupt the movie. When you bring animals into the mix, it is even harder.

But Fred? Fred was a genius at hitting his marks. Fred's ability to repeat action was mind-boggling. Once he got used to the camera, he seemed to sense what we were doing. Every time we would call to shoot the next take, Fred would jump right in there, always with an air of innocence and freshness, being himself and not needing to be told stuff all the time. It was amazing, really. He just seemed to be very relaxed and natural about the whole process.

And almost always, when it came time for his close-ups and the solo shots of him in action, he would do something, or react in some unique or unexpected way that would leave us howling with laughter and bring him running over to the camera with that huge grin laughing at himself, the whole film and us in general.

That doesn't mean he was always cooperative, though. For sure he would drift off when we weren't looking or get distracted by some little creature or situation that would require us to change what we were doing and film him intently involved with something we hadn't planned on. That's how we got that whole fox squirrel sequence, where he runs the squirrel up into the pine tree on the golf course. That wasn't in the script. He was supposed to be hanging around with Evinrude that whole time, standing by and watching him play golf.

But those were always fun and interesting moments, made the film a better film and helped us all to not take ourselves too seriously in what was supposed to be a comedy and adventure in the first place.

Oftentimes the reactions we got from him were not what we expected. When we first began filming him in the car with Evinrude, he kept looking out of the corner of his eye at us, as though he was suspicious of what we were doing. I had

Working with Fred “The Star” Dachshund on LITHIUM SPRINGS

envisioned him standing up on his legs, looking out the window; enjoying the ride and watching the scenery go by. A fellow adventurer with Evinrude, off to find the gold. I was chagrined at his refusals to stand up and look out the window and kept trying to get him to react more fully and completely. I kept tell him to "get into it, Fred. You're not INTO it." It wasn't until

I reviewed the footage that I realized that Fred WAS into it, more so than I had any idea as his reactions to the camera (and ultimately Evinrude's ravings) showed Evinrude to be a little crazy and off the wall, which of course is exactly what the film is about.

There is a lot of discussion about animals in film, how expensive they are and how hard they are to work with. We did not find this to be the case with Fred.

Perhaps the fact that we only had a three man crew and were shooting on a very low budget to begin with helped us. No doubt it did. First of all, there were only a few of us around at any one time shooting a scene and secondly it wasn't costing us a hundred thousand dollars a day either. It did, however, cost us time and energy and he did impact the story greatly as his actions so often were not what we had planned.

But I think he was actually very easy to work with. I did not find him difficult or time consuming. For sure it forced us to slow down and relax, to set a mood where Fred felt relaxed and not in a rush, where he could just do his thing calmly and with good intention - not anxious that we were demanding too much from him. But that was not necessarily a bad thing.

Oftentimes a movie set gets crazy, really crazy. There is so much going on, so many intense personalities, so much money being thrown around, and so many minute by minute crises, that a set can become this big, out-of-control ogre that takes over the film and impacts it in a negative way. So negative oftentimes that it just ruins the movie.

This did not happen to us and I think a big part of the reason is because we had Fred. Having Fred around kept us sane. Whenever it got crazy or there was some over-the-top nerve-wracking situation going on, there was Fred, cornering a lizard, playing with a toad, lazing around in the sun relaxing and taking it easy. It would bring us back to the real world, and remind us why we were there in the first place and what we were working for.

We had a great time making Lithium Springs. I think it is obvious to anyone who sees the film that we enjoyed the whole process, even though it took us 8 years and we are still counting now as we are getting it out to the public.

Working with Fred “The Star” Dachshund on LITHIUM SPRINGS

I have been on a lot of movie sets in my life and I can say for sure that I never had even close to as much fun on any other set as I did on our Lithium Springs set.

Having Fred in the mix and actually working in the scenes, having to deal with him as an actor and watching him do his thing was a privilege I think we all appreciated and enjoyed. I hope you all do, too.

Carter Lord
March 2, 2007