

FANGTASTIC

Exactly what breed of dog could possibly play 'Fang', Hagrid's enormous but cowardly boarhound in the Harry Potter films? Why, a Neapolitan Mastiff of course.



In the first of JK Rowling's Harry Potter books, *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone*, readers are introduced to the mighty Rubeus Hagrid, the Keeper of Keys and Grounds, described as being twice as tall as the average man and nearly three times as wide. About twice the size of the average dog and nearly three times as wide is his boarhound Fang. When writing, JK Rowling said she imagined Robbie Coltrane portraying Hagrid, which he later did in the films, but the author probably wasn't quite so sure what breed could play the part of Fang. But, according to Steve Cox, real-life owner of one of the Fangs, Warner Bros had only one breed in mind when they signed the Potter film deal – the Neapolitan Mastiff.

Warners' canine casting crew started their search at Crufts back in 1999, a year when Steve Cox was wowing the crowds and judges with his head-turning Neapolitan Mastiffs, a virtually new breed in the UK back then. The dogs' lumbering movement, massive bones and sheer size fitted Fang's brief exactly, and the crew later contacted Steve to pitch a deal. Warner Bros told Steve they wanted three lookalike dogs for a period of six months – three months' training and three months' filming on location. Keen to show off the eye-catching breed and give it widespread publicity, Steve agreed and





recommended three superb siblings from his Rayvonley bloodline: Bella, whom he still owned, Vito Junior and Hugo, both with new owners. The siblings were out of Vito (senior), Steve's top stud dog of five years' standing, and the son of a World Champion back in Napoli.

After all three owners signed the deal, the mighty Mastiffs went to stay with their assigned animal trainer from top UK agency Birds and Animals. For the first three months, the boisterous giants had to learn how to become big babies on command as Fang is described by Hagrid as "a bloody coward", scared stiff of most things – spiders, owls, rats and flying Ford Anglias – so if Bella, Vito and Hugo didn't act up, they'd never make the cut. All three dogs excelled as actors, responding well to the lure of treats and cuddles. On location, they proved real professionals, and were often switched mid-scene to get the best take. Despite painstaking editing and digital retouching, when the film reached the big screen, Steve could still spot the difference between the dogs.

"I always used to think there was only one Lassie, until the producers told me they needed three dogs just to play Fang," begins Steve. "When I watched the movie for the first time, it amazed me just what Bella, Vito and Hugo could do, particularly on the long-distance shots in the forest where they were being instructed from quite some distance away. But I guess it was only me who noticed when one dog was morphed into another."

Dog Walk of Fame

Sadly, the siblings have now passed away, but Leo – aka Rayvonley Lion, Crufts Best Dog 2007 – is happy to stand in on appointment. Most poignantly, on the 5 November 2007, Steve and Leo were invited to Battersea Park, London, by the Kennel Club and Sky Movies to join six other silver screen canine legends to be inducted into the world's first ever "Dog Walk of Fame". Leo represented Fang and beside him on the red carpet were breed representatives for other movie greats: Lassie from *Lassie Come Home*, Grommit from *Wallace and Grommit*, Bullseye from *Oliver Twist*, Toto from *Wizard of Oz*, Bobby from *Greyfriars Bobby*, and Chance and Shadow from *Homeward Bound: The Incredible Journey*. Many film fans and dog lovers turned up on the day to see their heroes being inducted and commemorated with their own park bench and plaque. In true Hollywood style, the dogs also had to dip their front paws into a ceramic plate. Leo did Bella, Vito and Hugo proud, and lapped up the limelight next to the other A-list canine celebs.

Battersea Park is to be the permanent home for the Dog Walk of Fame, and a shortlist of famous dogs will be inducted annually. "Dogs were long overdue a permanent celebration of their unique contribution to film history and the Dog Walk of Fame will do just that," announced Sky Movies' Director Ian Lewis at the ceremony. "The first inductees share an indelible place in the hearts of film lovers of all ages."



famous owners
of mastiffs

elliott roosevelt
peter ustinov
charles dickens
shannon doherty
DIRK BOGARDE
sylvester stallone

8

Page 17: Bella. Page 18, top: Steve with some of his dogs; below: Leo at the Dog Walk of Fame in Battersea Park. To find out more about Neapolitan Mastiffs visit www.theneapolitanmastiffclubuk.com, or to find out more about Steve Cox's Rayvonley Mastini bloodline, visit www.rayvonley.com