

HEALTH/WELFARE

Japan's guide dogs find their

By YVONNE CHANG
Staff writer

"It's the greatest challenge I've ever, ever had in my life," says Walter Conron, breeding and puppywalking manager of the Royal Guide Dogs Associations of Australia.

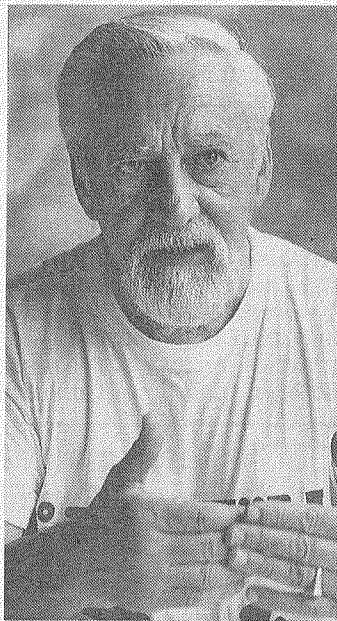
His challenge is to breed high quality guide dogs to suit the needs of visually impaired people around the world. In the course of his 20 years at the association, Conron has bred over 2,300 puppies, produced nearly 900 guide dogs, and exported the dogs to institutions around the world.

Conron recently visited the guide dog centers in Japan upon the invitation of pet food manufacturer Master Foods Ltd. as part of its promotional campaign to aid Japan's guide dog-rearing project, and during his two-week stay, revealed his impressions on the situation of guide dogs in Japan.

"I find Japan very contrasting; extreme from one end to the other," says Conron. The 62-year-old veteran breeder visited all eight training centers in Japan and was surprised at how the quality and policies of the training centers varied substantially from one to the other.

This is not surprising since the eight institutions, all designated as official guide dog training centers by the National Public Safety Commission, work independently without forming any coalition.

The methodology of training the dogs differs from center to center, often because of the differences in policy and conception of what a guide dog should be. Some emphasize dogs as tools for mobility and others emphasize them as companions of the blind. Some emphasize obedience,



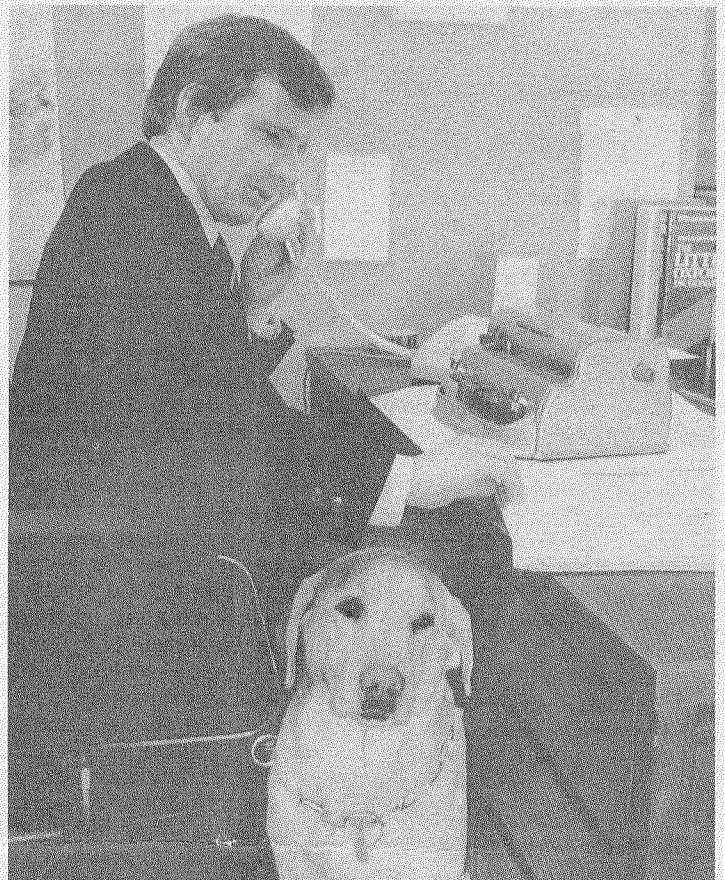
Walter Conron has made a specialty of breeding guide dogs in Australia.

PHOTO BY YOSHIKI MIURA

where the bottom eyelid turns inward.

Except for entropion, the symptoms of such diseases appear only when the dogs are about 5 or 6 years old. Some illnesses can be cured with medication or surgery, but serious illnesses like PRA cannot be cured, meaning the guide dogs lose their functions. Considering the time, effort and high expense involved in training a guide dog (a guide dog can cost anywhere between ¥1.5 million to ¥3 million) and the chronic shortage of the dogs, it is best when such hereditary diseases can be detected at an earlier stage.

Conron explains that most training centers, not only in Japan but around the world, are not careful enough about the pups they breed. Many pedigrees are donated by breeders, making it difficult to keep track of the history of the dogs. "That's what I'm trying to get across people



SPECIAL TRAINING and a special attitude are needed to make a guide dog like Alan, shown here with his master, Steven Gilbert.

PHOTO COURTESY OF THE ROYAL GUIDE DOGS ASSOCIATIONS OF AUSTRALIA

save the situation is to have an artificial insemination bank for guide dogs on a worldwide basis that everybody can draw on.

The Royal Guide Dogs Associations of Australia breed roughly between 160 and 180 pups every year. They breed many more than they need and pick only the cream of the crop before the dogs go into training, because the training is what is most costly.

Suitable pups are selected based on a number of criteria such as no cat or dog distraction, no food distraction, not being too nervous, training-oriented character, not easily excitable and not too aggres-

program has produced a 100 percent success rate at the stage of the second screening. Forty-five percent of all pups bred by the association become guide dogs.

"In Australia, I'm more fortunate because I'm on the job all day," says Conron who specializes only in the breeding and puppywalking programs. "Here in Japan they're doing a bit of everything," he says. The Royal Guide Dogs Associations of Australia have a staff of about 140 people, including 15 professional dog trainers. In contrast, Eye Mate Inc., the oldest guide dog training center in Japan, has eight perma-