



FROM CLUELESS TO CHAMPION . . . KHAKIS TO TAHARI



Friend: "What are you doing this weekend?"
 Me: "Showing Bonnie at a breed show"
 Friend: "Why on earth are you doing that?"
 Me: "Because I want to learn about the breed ring and I think Bonnie is worthy of some letters before her name"
 Friend: "No handler?"
 Me: "NO"
 Friend: "I don't know why you bother"

Yes, that was a typical conversation with many of my performance dog friends over the past two years. Many of them supported me in my endeavors but very few wanted to know much about it. Most of the time they walked away wondering what the attraction was in "teaching a dog to stand still for a piece of bait".

I too at one time believed that conformation was all about teaching a dog to stand still for some liver. As well, I thought you had to pretty much stuff your dog full of cheese to get them fat enough to be worthy of the purple ribbon.

But let's back up to the beginning before I ever popped a pan of liver in the oven or looked

up a recipe for silk (or satin) balls... While shopping breeders for my Stafford, I was often asked the question of whether I would show the dog in the breed ring. My answer was always the same. I wanted a temperamentally sound Stafford built well structurally for performance activities. Of course I had other items on my wish list, but this was the most important to me. I always told the breeders that if they sold me a dog they felt was good enough to be a Champion, then yes, I would indeed show it in the breed ring even though I hadn't a clue what it involved or what it was all about.

Ironically, while sitting in the midst of pouncing puppies in the backyard of one breeder, I found myself asking the breeder "do

you think she will do well in the breed ring?" Somehow over the course of my search I went from answering "I will show the dog if it is worthy" to asking "Is the dog worthy".

The day that I asked that question for the first time was the day that I met the sassy energetic bitch who two weeks later was in a crate secured to the back seat of my van on her way home to live with me. "Elivid's Shaken Not Stirred" aka "Bonnie".

On the drive home, I dreamt of all of the things Bonnie and I would do together. After working with nothing but rescues for the past 11+ years, she represented my first ever "fresh start". I also thought about the breed ring and the untred waters I was about to possibly enter.

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Over the next several months, Bonnie and I attended puppy socialization classes and classes that would form the foundation for performance activities. I heard of a facility close by that had drop-in handling classes so once in a while we attended that too. Before I knew it, my first conformation show was here!

We had entered a show in February 2011 in Secaucus NJ. It was held the Friday before Westminster. I thought for sure there would be an entry of Staffords there. How could there not be? I woke up early that morning, dressed in my khakis and blazer and hit the road.

Well, lo and behold, we were the only ones there. Me and my 9 month old puppy. So we

picked up our Best of Breed ribbon and promptly headed over to the photographer. Not because we got Best of Breed. Rather because we both just survived our first ever time in the breed ring and I wanted the proof. Having a seasoned conformation friend with me helped a great deal and she gave me good feedback on our showing. We certainly had work to do.

In the months that followed that February 2011 show, I wavered back and forth. We were having a wild ride in the conformation ring. While Bonnie was legitimately beating other bitches from time to time, and even scoring RWB from time to time, she was just never garnering that top spot. The carrot of the purple ribbon was constantly dangled in our face, just out of reach. Should I continue? Or should I just spay my bitch and get back to agility?

There was a lot more factoring into my decision than just winning/not winning. Along those 18 months, I met others showing their Staffords. We became friends and that's how I learned what it meant to build an entry. No one wants to waste money and be the only one at a show! Communication with other Stafford owners was key! But of course being a novice handler, and one who was never winning, I had to wonder why they were so willing to include me in their circle. I didn't know them very well. I wondered if I was points fodder. A few of them told me time and time again that they really liked my bitch and her time would come. As the months went by, I realized I was really enjoying my new friends and hanging out with them and supporting each other at shows. I knew I would miss this if I stopped.



On the flip side of making new friends was learning that not everyone wanted to be your friend and not everyone liked your bitch/dog.

I attended several big shows and spent a lot of time on the sidelines watching and trying to learn. It was very discouraging to me at times to hear some of the discussions going on outside the ring. Sometimes, people were just downright rude and they didn't care who was in earshot. While I did already have my own support system built that I knew I would rely on, it was discouraging to see my pool of potential mentors shrink. I think my most eye opening experience was the day that I setup a video camera outside the ring so that I could tape myself. I didn't have much time to fool with the camera so I turned it on and let it roll for several classes. All I can say is that watching and listening to those videos later on was quite eyeopening.

Obviously people didn't know it was rolling! Thankfully the comments about my own bitch were nothing terrible because I'm sure I would have hung up my hat right then. But I could only sit back and wonder what was being said about Bonnie behind my back. This isn't something a novice handler should really need to worry about.

While discussing with another exhibitor my dilemma of whether to continue, she asked me what my original goal was. It immediately brought things back into perspective for me. My original goal was to learn about the conformation ring. My bitch was helping me do that. I certainly still had a lot to learn. If this was something I hoped to be

successful at in the future, either with Bonnie or some other dog, it made sense to continue.

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Right around the same time as having that epiphany, I got injured while playing fetch with Bonnie on a long line. The line got trapped under my foot and she pulled it out from under me, hyperextending my knee and I heard a pop.

Thankfully, my ACL was still intact, however I sustained an avulsion fracture. I was now forced to learn another aspect of conformation. Hiring a handler. I panicked. What would my new friends think of me showing up with a handler? None of them used one!

At Bonnie's first show with her new friend, she was a little superstar. Strutting her stuff around the ring and standing like a statue for the judge. Who was that bitch and where did Ashley stash Bonnie? I realized that it was a good thing for Bonnie to work with someone who knew what they were doing for a while. So I became the "owner on the sidelines" for a few months. During those months, Bonnie showed very well for Ashley but never came home with the purple ribbon. And eventually, as Bonnie became more and more attached to me, the relationship between Ashley and Bonnie disintegrated to the point that it was detrimental to put them in the ring together. Bonnie just wanted her Mom. No one else would do.



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I needed to throw myself back in the saddle. My goals changed while Bonnie was being shown by Ashley. I saw how good she could look in the ring. I had to learn how to show her like Ashley did. And I now wanted those letters she deserved in front of her name more than ever. I now wanted to figure out what needed to happen so we could finally reach that purple ribbon.



My first step was to go back to handling classes. But this time, I found two handling instructors. One who helped teach the dog, the other who helped to teach the handler. It was with this second instructor that I learned that showing a dog wasn't all about teaching it to stand still for a piece of bait. You needed to convince the judge to look at you. Convince the judge that the dog at the end of your lead was indeed the best dog. The dog in the best condition. The dog gaiting around that ring like it owned it. Standing still for a piece of bait???? The least of my worries!!!! I needed to **SHOW MY BITCH** and believe she was worthy!

Bonnie and I threw ourselves into classes, I continued her fitness regimen, and I went shopping. I traded in my khakis and blazer for a bright yellow Tahari suit. Come August 2012, I was ready. Ready to get back in that ring and score that purple ribbon.

What happened from August 2012 through November 2012 is like a whirlwind to me. That very first show in August in my new yellow suit, Bonnie took Winners Bitch for her first two points. Her next show, she took Winners Bitch and Best of Breed and went on to astonish me with a Group 2 placement! More shopping ensued and my show wardrobe grew. In my new attire, we got a couple of RWBs in September and then at the end of September grabbed up our very first 3 point major! The following weekend we grabbed two of the three majors at Hatboro (supported entry) and Montgomery (specialty), including Best of Winners at Hatboro! In November we attended the Kennel Club of Philadelphia where we were awarded Best Opposite Sex, leaving us one point shy of that elusive Championship. And finally, wearing that bright yellow Tahari suit the following weekend in Maryland, we took Winners Bitch and Best of Winners for 2 points finishing Bonnie's Championship in style.

So now my new dog show wardrobe hangs in the closet. Freshly cleaned and pressed. Will we continue our learning in the breed ring by adding GCH to our goals? Or will we focus purely on performance going forward and the wardrobe will wait until a new puppy graces the household? Only time will tell. But in the meantime, I'd like to thank everyone who supported me and "The Bonster" along the way. You know who you are.

****This article is dedicated to my Dad who instilled in me the ethic of "never give up". Dad tried to not give up. He fought hard. But he lost his battle with lung cancer in October 2012. ****