

My Road Towards the OTCh

My parent's best friends when I was growing up were Mike and Shirley Bavalacqua. Mike and Shirley had a tremendous number of silver trays and trophies that they had won at obedience trials with their Standard Poodles.

Once I was married with a house of my own, I wanted dogs. After losing my black Lab, Rufus, I just couldn't get another Lab. So we

did some homework on several different breeds, including Dalmatians. And after attending the Grand National Rodeo and seeing the Budweiser Dal hanging out with the Clydesdales, we knew we wanted a Dal. I still had horses back then and liked the connection between the two as well as the breed's up and happy attitude.

The first Dal I ever actually laid my hands on was Kathe Blink's BIS Am/Can CH. Driftwood's Chimney Cricket, CD. Kathe and Cricket had just finished competing in Novice B at the Golden Gate Kennel Club show, and Cricket was High-Scoring Dal that day. It was also the day they went on to Best In Show. I loved how Cricket jumped up to put her front feet on Kathe's arm then stretched over to say "hello" with a happy, waggy tail.

My first dal and first obedience dog, Monty, (Proctor's Lady Montague, UD) started in puppy classes as soon as she had all her shots. With Shirley's guidance we went from there to an "attention class". The rest, as they say, is history. We continued training and ended up taking private lessons. Monty and I went on to earn her CD, CDX, and UD along with Top Spots placements nearly every year that we showed.

While training Monty I met some wonderful friends. We got together at matches and trials as well as doing things without the dogs. We'd train together some evenings and sometimes on weekends. Many of them went on to earn their OTCh (Obedience Trial Champion) titles, some with their Novice A dogs. (Novice A is the class for people who have never earned an obedience title on a dog.)

I'm competitive by nature and I live in an area with some incredible working dogs. To earn a 199 and not even place in northern California is not unusual. I wanted to be able to compete at that level and to show people what a Dal can do.

My next Dal, Haley, (Montague's SunRunner Rambler, CDX, RN, TT, CGC) had the attitude to do it. She put 125% into enjoying life. Unfortunately she blew her ACL (anterior cruciate ligament) early on. This was in the days before the TPLO surgery, so although she's totally sound, her sits are not pretty. I often got points off for no sits because after the surgery her knees didn't allow her to sit with her rear end completely on the ground. So we trained and showed through Utility and earned Top Spot placements along the way. Haley retired a couple years ago with two Utility legs (yeah, that was tough!) I'm now showing her son, Hayden aka "The Baby Boy" – (Montagues Vintage



SunRunner, UDX, TT, CGC), and at the time I'm writing this he needs only 6 more points to finish his OTCh.

Having been born in my home, Hayden and I bonded very early. I spent every moment I could with the puppies and loved every minute of it. By three weeks old Hayden only had eyes for me. As it turns out he was also the most nicely marked in the litter filled with good structure and great temperaments. He's the perfect combination of his mom's drive and his dad's work ethic and desire to please.

When looking at a litter, in addition to knowing that mom and dad both have good, solid temperaments and listening to what the breeder has to say about day-to-day personalities of each puppy, I also like to use the Volhard's Puppy Aptitude Test when I evaluate litters. I use it as a tool. In most cases it's not an end-all-and-be-all decision maker for me, but when done correctly it does give me a more thorough look at each puppy's basic temperament and gives hints on areas in which they may need a little more help later in life.

I start training my puppies right off the bat, as soon as they come home, or in Hayden's case, as soon as their brain can start processing little things. By seven weeks a puppy can start to learn sit, down, stand, among other things. It's all done very positively. After all, a puppy can't be "wrong" because they don't know anything. I start puppies in short little sessions. It's more like shaping or forming with lots of treats and praise.

I strongly feel that bonding with your dog is really important. They need to *want* to work with you and *for* you. One of the best compliments I get is when people tell me how much they love watching Hayden and me in the ring. They often comment "His tail never stops wagging, and he's obviously having a blast". Win or not, qualify or not, I love every moment of being in the ring with this boy of mine because he loves being there with me.

Attention work is important, in my opinion. There are different ways of getting and keeping a dog's attention. Heeling is the one exercise that follows you through all the class levels so it's important that you have solid heeling in Novice. In my part of the country earning a placements in the "B" classes (from which you earn OTCh points) often comes down to straight fronts and finishes. The competition is so deep here that points off usually come from a crooked front or finish. But you have to have much more than that in all the other parts of each exercise to even get close to winning.

If you're interested in pursuing obedience, research and talk to a lot of breeders. Get a puppy from someone who is as interested in producing puppies with good temperament, health, and structure as spotting patterns. Don't settle for a puppy with less than great conformation. A dog that can't make it in the breed ring because he/she has straight shoulders (for instance) isn't going to make it the long haul in the obedience ring. Structure is really important.

For me, the greatest joy is in the journey and having my best friend and partner right there beside me every step of the way. It can sometimes feel like a long journey, longer for some, depending on how often you show your dog – and then life sometimes gets in the way of what your plans are and slows you down. But in the end, no matter how far we go or how long it takes – we will be doing this together.

I wish everyone the best of luck and many green ribbons along their own journey.

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With the help of Holly Waldrop.