

The Making of an M.V.P.

The owner of a quintuple champion shares her training tips.

For anyone serious about dog sports, there is no substitute for regular training and fieldwork. But shrewd competitors can gain an edge by listening to their sport's highest achievers, and learning from their triumphs and failures.

You won't always have access to the big names in your chosen field, so from time to time "Dogsport 101" will bring their hard-earned wisdom to you, in their own words.

We chatted with Gerianne Darnell, the owner-operator of the Sunshine Obedience School in Council Bluffs, Iowa, who writes a regular column for Front & Finish magazine.

She made news in 2012, when her Border Collie Riva became the third quintuple champion in AKC history. Over 12 years, Darnell guided the remarkable Riva to championship

titles in conformation, obedience, agility, tracking, and herding competition.

She also has a quadruple champion Border Collie and has had great success training multi-titled Papillons at the highest levels. "Mention the little dogs," she urged us, "so people know that dog sports are not just for big dogs."

After decades in dogs, Darnell's enthusiasm is undiminished, and her conversation is punctuated with laughter and lots of exclamation points.



This Border Collie is the third dog in AKC history to become a quintuple champion.

COURTESY GERIANNE DARNELL

Hi, Gerianne. How's Riva?

She'll be 14 in August, and she has just in the last three months begun to slow down. But last week she got into the pond, and she still goes for walks and she still makes it up onto the bed every night.

It's nice to be able to mention her in the present tense.

I just hope she's still with us by the time this article comes out.

We'd better get started then! When you began with Riva, did you train for multiple events at the same time, or did you tick them off one at a time?

The first discipline I do is tracking. All dogs use their nose, and in tracking they're using their nose and walking. They're not getting on equipment, and they're not being asked to heel with their head up. Then I move on to conformation [dog shows].

But what I do like to do is to imprint on a puppy all the various things they will be doing. For example, I might have a very young puppy do an A-frame that's flat on the ground or follow food heeling a few steps. I like to introduce a lot of things very low-key as a puppy.

Like the Papillon I'm showing right now. He just finished his Grand Championship, just got his CD [Companion Dog], and got his TD [Tracking Dog] in March—he won't be 3 for another month. He was started on a lot of things as a young puppy, but then I concentrated on just a couple at a time before I sprinkled in a third one. But I don't introduce them to one activity to exclusion and then move on to the other.

And this early work includes the basic obedience commands: sit, come when called, stay, and so on?

Every single discipline is predicated on obedience. You're using obedience at the track, on the agility course, and in the conformation

ring—so it has to be woven into everything you do with your dog.

How old is a puppy before you can begin working with him?

I start training that puppy the moment it comes through the door. Sometimes people misunderstand. You're training a dog whether you want to or not. Everything you do with a dog is in some way training it. If you allow a dog on the furniture—which, of course, we do at our house!—if the dog barks when someone comes to the door, your reaction to those behaviors is in some way training the dog.

At what age can you spot a good prospect?

It depends on the breed, but at around 8 to 12 weeks. Everybody talks about teaching dogs to pay attention; I want a puppy that *already* pays attention. I want that puppy looking up at me. When I look at a litter of puppies, the first thing I'm looking for is eye contact.

Who's harder to train, an owner or a dog?

Oh, that's an easy question—and I think you know the answer! Definitely the owner. The amount of time you put into a dog is essentially equivalent to what you're going to get out of the dog. Yes, some breeds are easier to train than others—but *not that much* really.

My first dog was a UDTX [Utility Dog Tracking Excellent] Basset Hound. And thank God I didn't know that I wasn't supposed to be able to do that with a hound because I might have been tempted to quit when it got hard. But I didn't know better.

I learned a lot from that dog. We picked her up on our way home from our honeymoon. We were college students. We'd paper our tiny little house with newspapers and go away for eight hours—imagine what we found when we got home! So, we went to puppy school. My husband did his internship in Florida, he's a veteri-

narian, and that's where I discovered dog training. All I did all day long was train that poor Basset Hound!

Every good trainer-handler has that first dog they can make mistakes with.

Oh yeah—and a second dog, and a third dog ... !

What about a dog who "hits a wall" during training?

People seem to think that a dog's training curve is going to go up and up and up. But plateaus are just part of the training. And if you understand that, then it makes it easier when it happens. When you get to a plateau and you're discouraged, stop and take a look back at where you were with this dog a year ago. And I guarantee you that you're going to be much further along than you were then. But you haven't been paying attention to your accomplishments, you've only been looking at your setbacks.

Do you work with food?

Absolutely. It's important to use food to show a dog what you want, then get the food out of the picture, and later you can bring it back in for motivation. I don't want to work without a paycheck, and I don't think my dog wants to either. What the dog has to learn is the value of delayed reward. The reward doesn't necessarily *have* to be food, but there has to be one. Sometimes, like with a Border Collie doing herding, the reward is the activity itself.

The dog didn't sign up for this. The dog isn't waiting for the titles to come in the mail. And, unfortunately, the dog is going to be gone so quickly. So, it's got to be more about the journey than the destination. For me, it's all about the training. The showing and the titles just validate the daily training.

For more on Darnell, Riva, and their extended canine family, visit sunshineobedience.com. 🐾