

Meet . . .

Owner-Handler

Betty Lewis

Waccabuc Great Danes

1) Number of years showing dogs.

I started getting involved in Great Danes in 1969. My last Dane died in 2009. I've also had Whippets since 1997.

2) Your kennel name and how you got it.

Waccabuc is a place name in New York State. I was a lifeguard at the Waccabuc Country Club Beach for 6 years, and Bill and I were married in Mead Chapel, Waccabuc, NY. We have strong roots in Waccabuc, and didn't want to make up names like BilBet!

3) Where you live.

For the last 30 years, we've lived in Amherst, New Hampshire.

4) Where do you travel to show?

New England and New York mostly.

5) How many shows do you attend in a year?

No idea. My dogs are all finished, so there's no need to go to many. However, I enjoy showing and have two dogs whom I'm showing in a meandering fashion towards the Grand Championship. Maybe.

6) Have you ever hired and/or used professional handlers and for what purpose?

I have actually tried this route many times, but they never were as successful with my dogs as I was.

7) What made you decide to owner-handle your Great Danes?

I enjoy it.

8) What are the greatest advantages of owner-handling your dogs?

I am reliable. I always show up when I intend to. Then there's the bond between the owner and the dog that is a rare commodity with most professional handlers.

9) What are the biggest challenges of owner-handling your dogs?

Ahhhhh, the illusive 'unknown face' when it comes to SOME judges.

10) What do owner-handlers need to consider if they want to be competitive in the ring?

They need to go to handling classes for most of their lives. Learn from different handlers.

Eventually, the 'tricks of the trade' will come naturally to you, but you'll still have to learn how to apply them to each new dog.

11) Do you feel your dog has ever been over-looked in the ring by the judge because you are an owner-handler and if yes please describe.

Yes, I've had judges appear to be interested in my dog throughout the judging, then look up and down the lead, walk on, and never look at me again. I can 'hear' plain as if the judge said it to my face, "I don't know who are."

12) Do you feel there is any stigma against owner-handlers in Great Danes and if yes please explain.

I think you're asking if most Great Dane judges are fair or political. I think there 'are' political judges, but there isn't a 'trend'. It's an individual thing from person to person. So, no; I don't think there's a stigma in Great Danes that wouldn't be present with a specific political judge in a different breed. In addition, as a judge myself, I'd like to say that I think most judges are honest. Unfortunately, not all are competent in every breed they judge. This gives rise to lack of confidence in one's own judging, and then people are more likely to look for 'props' to give them more input. If that prop is a known face, well, they just might go with that one.

13) What tips would you give a new owner-handler to help them step up their game?



Work with your dog in different venues, like freestyle, rally or agility to develop the team.

You can overdo conformation training, which is, in reality, pretty boring. Yes, you have to practice it, but don't overdo it. Have someone video tape you at a handling class, and then critique yourself.

14) What is the most valuable advice you ever received about handling your own dogs from a professional handler?

I have learned a lot from professional handlers, but the most useful is to have a handler coach you on what looks best with the 'specific' dog you're handling at the time.

15) What is the most helpful technique you ever learned just by watching professional handlers?

I'm sure there are many, but over the course of 40 plus years, I've made so much of what I do in the ring 'my own', that I can't think of any particular one with transcends all the dogs I've handled.

16) What are some common mistakes you see owner-handlers committing in the ring?

Well, okay. As someone who has taught many handling classes, here's my biggest pet peeve: the dangling leash! Bill Alston was my first handling teacher, and he drilled proper lead folding into my head. Don't detract from your dog, and that lead floating on the breeze when you move is the very worst handler-made distraction!

a) Creating distractions from the dog, as mentioned above with the leash. There are other distractions, too.

b) Not learning how to move a dog at the most attractive pace for the dog.

c) Unintentionally pulling the dog out of the stack while trying to stack it.

17) What have been some of your show ring successes as an owner-handler?

One memorable win was under Bob Ecker back in the 1980s. We had bought our first Great Dane from Bob and Joyce Ecker, Devrok Great Danes. All those years later, Bob judged and gave me a Best of Breed with our first dog's great-grandson!

18) What are some of the most rewarding things about owner-handling for you?

I love showing off a dog who I think is excellent quality. In addition, I love the special time I spend with my dog in the ring.

19) Most professional handlers began as owner-handlers. What keeps you from taking that same route?

I did toy with the idea at one time, but there were so many elements to the job that I didn't enjoy, that I never pursued it. I was very happy to back up handlers or friends. That's my one regret being a judge; can't do that anymore.

21) Who is your favorite judge and why?

I do love to watch some judges at work. Their thought processes are apparent, whether I agree with them or not. Of course, when they agree with 'my' assessment, they become my temporary favorites. The ones I can think of off the top of my head are still alive, so I won't mention names.