

Meet . . .

Owner Handler

**Michelle L. Bjorkman**

DayStar Great Danes



**1) Tell us your whole name.**

Michelle L. Bjorkman  
(married).

**2) Number of years showing dogs.**

41 years.

**3) Your kennel name & how you got it.**

DayStar Great Danes – I got it from the New Testament of the Bible. I was reading one day, with a kennel name on my mind and saw it and that was it.

**4) Where do you live.**

Waukegan, Illinois, 35 miles north of Chicago on the Illinois/Wisconsin line.

**5) Where do you travel to show?**

I show in Illinois, Wisconsin, Indiana and Iowa. In the past years, I would go to Ohio, Minnesota, and Missouri.

**6) How many shows do you attend in a year?**

When I am showing a dog, I attend quite a few because in the Midwest, we have a lot of shows. Also it depends how fast they finish. Maybe 20?

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

Yes, I have used handlers. I have had dogs that will not show for me. I have also used handlers because I just can't seem to get past the handlers to get a major, so I play the game and finish the dog.

**8) What made you decide to owner-handle your Great Danes?** At heart, I truly love handling. I was in other breeds before Great Danes and also took other breeds in for friends. I just really love showing my own dogs and enjoy it too.

**9) What are the greatest advantages of owner-handling your dogs?** Well, first and foremost, it is a very satisfying feeling to show and finish your own dogs. When they co-operate with you as owner, you are like a team and you have that love advantage with that dog as his/her owner. I enjoy spending that time with my dog because with all of them except 4 of them, I have bred them all and have known them since they were born.

**10) What are the biggest challenges of owner-handling your dogs?** Well, I know that no one wants to talk about it and will deny it over and over, but when you are a owner-handler and don't advertise, there is a part of the show sport that the judges do gravitate to handlers and also, there is the 'out of the ring' element where the dogs do look around for their owner. I am just happy to get a championship on my dogs and I specialied once and said I never do it ever again.

- 11) What do owner-handlers need to consider if they want to be competitive in the ring?** You have to be good. You have to have that confident edge with the dog in your presentation. You have to have a good dog and know your dog's conformation to know what your dogs weak points are along with their strong points. If you are not pushing the edge of handling well, then you can say you were out handled. So I would say to the new person, listen, watch and allow yourself to be disciplined by someone that knows the sport and humble yourself. That is what I did when I started out in the 70's. I was mentored by older ladies in the breed.
- 12) 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, however, I can't read the mind of the judge. It's a hard subject... most people don't want to talk about it, but do know it happens. I had a bitch that gave the judge huge interest and the temperature was in the upper 90's and humid and the judge even talked to me in the line saying things about my bitch like, "I love this girl" and then pulled out a handler with me, moved us together one last time and because of the high heat and my bitch just moved a little slower, he gave it to the handler. The handler and the family members took the whole thing, Winners Dog, Winners Bitch and Best of Breed and each dog looked totally different. Sometimes too, I just really don't know the judge or what they like, either.
- 13) Do you feel there is any stigma against owner-handlers in Great Danes and if yes please explain.** I don't think it's any different in any other breed. I have handled for friends in other breeds and been involved with being around the people and it is usually the same. I would say I would have to put the pressure more on the judges and what they do, than the people in the ring.
- 14) What tips would you give a new owner-handler to help them step up their game?** Allow themselves to be very teachable and watch, watch, watch at ring side and observe all the little things they do... that is what I did and I had people help me a lot when I got into showing dogs.
- 15) What is the most valuable advice you ever received about handling your own dogs from a professional handler?** I really can't answer that because most of the time, it's been my good friends at ring side that have helped me with telling me things they see me doing that I, of course, can't see when in the ring. So, most of my help has come from friends. I also had a tough conformation teacher that taught the fine points of handling.
- 16) What is the most helpful technique you ever learned just by watching professional handlers?** You make yourself 'invisible'. You are in the ring to assist your trained dog to be examined and judged by the judge. You don't want 'you' in the way, bringing attention more to you than the dog.
- 17) What are some common mistakes you see owner-handlers committing in the ring?** Nervous activity with baiting or turning their dog around in circles over and over again. It comes from their fear and lack of confidence and that gets in the way of showing the dog. It's a mental thing... its setting aside the notion that the judge is looking at you. When really, they are looking at how you present your dog.
- 18) What have been some of your show ring successes as an owner-handler?** I breeder-owner-handled a 7 month old puppy that was taken to the National at the last minute and got Reserve Winners Dog with him and Best Puppy. His mother got an Award of Merit, too. All owner-handled. I had a puppy that won a lot around here in Sweepstakes and matches and I beat Specials with her in the Breed ring and had 3 Best of Breeds with her before she was 10 ½ months old.

**19) What are some of the most rewarding things about owner-handling for you?** Spending time with my dog. I love doing things with my dogs and enjoy being part of their life in showing them... they are first my pet before they are a show dog. Pointing them and finishing them is super rewarding.

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

I am fussy about how trained the dog is and the way it's trained. I have handled for friends because they have basically trained their dogs the same way I have trained mine. I don't want to have to fight a dog in the ring that does not cooperate. That's just not fun. I've been asked many times, but I just make myself available to 'cover' in the ring when the handlers are stuck with other dogs and need help.

**21) Who is your favorite judge and why?** There was a judge a while ago named Emmett Wiseman. I think he had a bum eye, but he was good to many of us around here. He had a way about him that was soft and kind and was good to owner handlers in the ring. I liked Mr. Wiseman. He was a nice judge.

**22) Bonus Question! (Please answer!) If the mockumentary movie "Best in Show" made a sequel with you as one of the characters, what famous actor/actress would play YOU?** Sandra Bullock