

Meet . . .

Owner-Handler

## Samantha VanFleet



- 1) **Tell us your whole name.** Samantha VanFleet.
- 2) **Number of years showing dogs.** Two years.
- 3) **Your kennel name and how you got it.** I don't have my own kennel name. I work closely with Bobby Payne of Dundane West Kennels. He is my mentor.
- 4) **Where you live.** Salt Lake City, Utah.
- 5) **Where do you travel to show?** Utah, Nevada, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, California, Montana.
- 6) **How many shows do you attend in a year?** On average, I go to at least one show per month, during the spring there are sometimes two show weekends per month.
- 7) **Have you ever hired and/or used professional handlers and for what purpose?** I have not; I like to show my own dogs.
- 8) **What made you decide to owner-handle your Great Danes?** There is an amazing bond between a handler and a dog, and it is even stronger when it is you with your own dog. I love my dogs and I love doing activities with them. It makes me proud to be able to show off my dog in the ring.
- 9) **What are the greatest advantages of owner-handling your dogs?** I am so in tune to what my dog is feeling, I can pick up on things that a normal handler couldn't because I spend all my time with him.
- 10) **What are the biggest challenges of owner-handling your dogs?** The politics, there are certain judges that you know would really like your dog but they aren't owner-handler friendly.
- 11) **What do owner-handlers need to consider if they want to be competitive in the ring?** I think the most important thing is studying handling technique. There are ways for an owner-handler to blend in with the pros if your technique is strong and you are smooth with your handling. The biggest mistake I see is a new owner handler 'outing' themselves as an owner-handler because they haven't been working on how they look while handling their dog.
- 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, the only time that I felt this way was when I had entered the Amateur Owner Handler Class, it was as if the judge didn't even look at us. Needless to say, I have never entered that class again because of that experience. I feel like I work hard enough that even though a judge may not recognize me as a pro handler I can make myself look like one and then they usually give my dog a good look.
- 13) **What tips would you give a new owner-handler to help them step up their game?** Take a handling class, learn from other handlers in the breed, and find a good mentor who can help you.
- 14) **What is the most valuable advice you ever received about handling your own dogs from a professional handler?** Know your own dog's faults, be aware of them and how you are making them look when you are in the ring. A lot of owner-handlers are so worried about hiding their dogs faults that they actually make them stand out and its obvious to the judge. Instead focus on accentuating the strengths your dog has.

- 15) **What is the most helpful technique you ever learned just by watching professional handlers?** SLOW DOWN.  
Don't be afraid to re-do the down and back or re-stack your dog before the exam. When I first started I was going so fast, and missing things.
- 16) **What are some common mistakes you see owner-handlers committing in the ring?** I think a lot of owner-handlers need to pay more attention to the judges ring procedure before going in the ring. When you go in the ring and aren't familiar with the ring procedure a judge will automatically categorize you as someone who is owner-handling or new.
- 17) **What have been some of your show ring successes as an owner-handler?** I have only been showing for about a year, but have put a major on my dog owner-handled, with professional competition, and have several Reserve Major wins. The biggest success for me is the fact that I finally got the routine with my dog down. He knows exactly what is expected of him and he works well for me. You can see how well our bond is when I am in the ring with him.
- 18) **What are some of the most rewarding things about owner-handling for you?** Being able to look at my dog's behavior and know that I trained him, I make him do his job and help make him look good. It's so rewarding to be able to work with my dog so closely and see his progress as well as mine and it makes our bond so much stronger.
- 19) **Most professional handlers began as owner-handlers. What keeps you from taking that same route?** Nothing! I am hoping to work closely with some pro handlers that are friends of mine, and eventually start handling for other people.
- 20) **Who is your favorite judge and why?** I don't have a favorite yet, of course I love every judge who has ever pointed to me for a win! There are a few judges that stick out to me as owner-handler friendly, and one of them is Mari Hayhurst. I have shown to her and she is such a pleasure to show to. You can really tell that she loves what she does and she doesn't care who is on the other end of the lead but she does expect you to present your dog well.
- 21) **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?** Lucy Hale!