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The Lamorinda Woman Behind Champion Dogs

By Sophie Braccini



Moraga dog trainer Judie Howard works with Ryder, preparing for obedience trial competition. Photo Andy Scheck

Judie Howard is a legend in the world of obedience training for dogs in the United States. People come from all over the country to spend time with the Bollinger Canyon trainer who can make the meekest dog of any breed a champion. For more than 25 years she has managed one of the largest obedience schools in the country, with more than 70 American Kennel Club obedience titles to her credit. She now trains one-on-one in her own facility with dogs and their owners who want to compete.

While small in stature, Howard emanates a purposefulness and determination. But she says she's not an alpha female: "We are far removed from wolves," she says with a smile. She does acknowledge, however, that dogs immediately recognize that she is in charge. The real secret to her success is she loves them to pieces. For her, each dog she trains is unique. She thinks something can be learned from each breed. If they

are understood, she says, they give their best with joy.

The Moraga resident started dog training at age 9. "It was a neighbor's dog and I taught him to sit," she remembers. Her family could not have dogs, so she got her first German Sheppard and trained it after she got married. "Dogs love coming here to be trained," she says. "Owners tell me that their dogs start barking as soon as the car enters Bollinger Canyon Road. They pull them up my stairs and when they get in the arena they start running circles around me."

After Howard won her first Utility title - an American Kennel Club advanced obedience trial category - with her first two dogs, she felt confident enough to start her own training school in Moraga in 1974. "We first used the tennis courts at Campolindo, then the gym," she remembers. She trained at Acalanes High School, Del Valle High School and Saint Mary's College. Soon word spread about her training. "At some point we trained 350 dogs a week," she remembers. She had Novice classes that she ran with the help of one assistant for every four dogs, and had as much as 45 dogs at a time. "Within 15 minutes we could get every one of them to sit and not bark," she remembers.

Howard focuses on praise. "I'm very consistent, I am lavish with praise, and I set very clear boundaries," she says. "I don't punish, and when I raise the level of difficulty I explain to the dogs why I do it."

With the help of her husband, Gary Howard, she built her own training site on her property 20 years ago. "Training is very good for the dogs, both physically and mentally," says Debbie Hughs of Moraga, who's been working with Howard for two years. She brings her Papillion Remy for one-on-one training because he is very shy. "He was afraid of the wind," she remembers, but she is sure he will qualify at his first competition scheduled at the end of this month.

Nia Surber has been training with Howard for 10 years. "I trained with a Shetland Sheepdog that was afraid of everything," she remembers. "It took us a long time, but we went all the way to Utility with him." She is now training Dexter, a vivaciously small 2-year-old dog. During the session Dexter practices scent discrimination, as well as fetching a dumbbell that his handler has touched, fetching on command in spite of distraction, responding to hand commands, jumping, walking side-by-side with his owner without a leash, and sitting in place when his handler goes away. "It is so

much fun, and Judie is the best; she's as good as it gets," says Surber. "She has the ability to come up with at least five different ways to fix a problem, and she knows every breed of dog." What's different about her, Surber adds, is that she is also very good with people. "It's nice to be able to have a good laugh sometimes," she says.

Howard says that over her career she must have trained 60,000 dogs of every breed one might think of, and does not remember one failure. Howard also trains her own dogs and is now going for an unprecedented 14th AKC Obedience Trial Championship.

Levels of Competition in AKC Standard Obedience

According to the American Kennel Club, there are three levels of competition in Standard Obedience: Novice, Open and Utility. Novice is for the dog just getting started and includes exercises such as heel on leash and figure eight, as well as standing for examination. The Open level includes more complicated exercises, and Utility is the third and highest level of obedience competition, involving more complicated tasks including scent discrimination and signal exercises. To achieve the Obedience Trial Champion title, dogs with UD titles must win 100 points and a first-place in Utility B and Open B, plus a third first-place win in either class, under three different judges. For more information, visit http://www.apps.akc.org/classic/events/obedience/getting_started.cfm.



Judie Howard works with her dogs on differing commands. Photo Andy Scheck

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