

Labrador people



Madilyn after win at DFWLRC. Photo by Page Johnson.

The Labrador Quarterly
Talks with
Mike and Lenore Hamilton
BLACKWING
Cabot, Arkansas

Part II

This interview was conducted at the Potomac Labrador Retriever Club Specialty in April 2011 by Lynne Robertson.

How do you pick your puppies, what's your process?

Lenore: When it's just Mike and I by ourselves, we've been doing it long enough that we really don't have to have any discussion much on the puppies. We get the table, set it in the exact same spot, sometimes he'll shoot pictures at about seven weeks to look at them and set everything up. We just go through the puppies, set them up, look at it, he or I will say, "All right, next one." Then just

go through all of them, and really I think the puppies in the long run that are going to end up being the great puppies, are



Jeff and Mike on a good day duck hunting.

those puppies that when you instantly set them up, it's like, "Whoa." That's what you're looking for. It's just, do they have it? We've been doing it long enough we really don't have to discuss fronts and rears and tops.

But when you set them up, are you going, "Whoa"?

Lenore: Hopefully.

Mike: It's either, "Whoa" or "No." (laughter)

Lenore: After you've been doing it long enough, you've got this picture in your mind of what you're looking for, you're looking at the angles, the topline, the structure, the length of neck, the head, all of that, but you don't have to verbally go through all of that. Occasionally we will if there's a couple that we both really like, then we'll start discussing which one has the best rear angle and going through and looking at all of that stuff. Most of the time we go through it and say, "Which one do you like?"

Mike: It's making that overall decision and getting too bogged down on details.

Lenore: Where you can't see the forest for the trees. The longer you look at it and the more you analyze it, the more you confuse the issue.

Mike: There are certain things that you really need that you might not want to compromise on, but then you've always got to back up and look at the big picture on the puppy.

Is that easy to do?

Mike: Nothing is easy about any of this, if it was easy, everybody would be doing it. (laughter)

Lenore: Different people look for different things. We know what we're looking for in a puppy, but that may not be what somebody else is looking for in a puppy.

Do you both have good eyes for a dog?

Mike: I think so. My background is with my job. I trained livestock judging teams and horse judging teams in our state, so that basic structure translates pretty easily. Lenore spends a lot of time studying, looking at the dogs, and over the years she

pretty much knows what we have and what we don't have. Between the two of us, we manage to get it done.

It seems like a lot of people who are successful in dog breeding have livestock. The livestock people seem to have a little bit of an advantage from looking at cows and horses all the time.

Mike: A lot of that goes back to the fact that if you've got a breeding bull or a stallion or something that's not structurally sound, you don't have anything. You either have it or you don't have anything. There's an old saying in the cattle business, they have to be able to walk on the truck to get to the processing plant at least. If they've got a bad structural problem they might not be able to do that. Breeding animals with bad structural problems, they're not going to make it in the industry.

How does breeding cattle and horses compare with breeding dogs?

Mike: It's more expensive. (laughter)

Lenore: The equipment costs more.

Mike: It takes a bigger trailer to haul them in. (laughter) It's the same, really, the same type of considerations.

Don't a lot of horse breeders breed for color and things like that?

Mike: No. There's nothing I know of right now anymore specialized than horse breeding. I'm not an expert on that, but they're breeding cutting horses, they're breeding western pleasure horses, they're breeding halter horses, racehorses, whatever horse, but every one of those has some unique things they have to have. It's pretty specialized.

But they have just as much knowledge as you do about the genetics?

Mike: I would say they have more knowledge. They have to know their ball game, their breeds and what they're going for.

Lenore: I would think for livestock cattle and horses, that's their business, that's their livelihood, so they probably know more.

Mike: I think the base, as far as the genetics is pretty much the same.

From picking your puppies, you said Lenore socializes them, can you talk about your process? Also, do you subscribe to that whole critical puppy

period to sixteen weeks and what do you do in those first four months?

Lenore: I definitely do, that's a critical time. That's when they need all that attention. Once we pick out what we're going to keep, and the others have been placed in pet homes, my philosophy is spoil them rotten. They're in the house with me, they do not hear the word "no." For training puppies, the first thing I start

teaching them right at seven weeks is to set their ears, because to me that has been the hardest thing on an older dog is to get them to set their ears. At seven weeks, everything is fun, everything is exciting, they set their ears over everything, so that's what I first start working on. I bring them in the house, play with them, give them cookies, toys. I am with them as much as I possibly can be during

that time period.

When you want them to set their ears, do you just capture the behavior and then give them a treat?

Lenore: Yes. At that age, you do it three or four times and they've got it. But in that time period between seven and about sixteen weeks, if you're not consistent with that, they forget it. By the time they get to fourteen weeks, then they can be kind of scared, so you have to really



Ch. Blackwing Super Freak.

keep it up and get it established by the time they're four months and then they pretty much have it down.

Mike: Any training is repetition and positive reinforcement.

Lenore: A 100 percent positive reinforcement.

Mike: When I go out there in my Sunday clothes and one of them jumps up and puts their muddy foot right on my chest, I might not be so positive. Lenore will still be positive.

Lenore: With Mike, stay away from the puppies until they're about six months. (laughter)

Mike: I tell them, "No." In training dogs for hunting or whatever, it always has to be more positive reinforcement. If it's not, you wind up ruining them.

Lenore: You can ruin them real easily by being too hard on them. In the training, until they're about six months, it's 100 percent positive, you don't make anything too serious for them. Especially training one for the show ring. We have a group that we practice conformation with once a week, so that really helps with the puppies a lot. The first time I take a puppy in the ring, it's all fun. You make a big mistake if you make training too serious right off the bat. They have to learn that this is fun in the ring. If you overtrain, make it too serious before they learn that it's fun for them, you're not ever going to get the personality out of them. Once we start showing and they learn this is fun, then we can start fine-tuning the rest of it on how they stand and all of that, once they learn that this is fun. Even at home, I'm training for the show ring, but the puppies don't even realize they're being trained. I start with the ears, getting them set with a cookie. Once they figure out how to set the ears, then you can start working on the feet placement with the treats.

Do you place the feet?

Lenore: I never touch them.

You just let them do it and reward it?

Lenore: I get to where I can maneuver them with my hand by holding bait, then I tell them, "Move," if I want a certain foot to be moved. As soon as they move it, they get a piece of bait. It doesn't take them long before they learn how to place those

feet.

Mike: It's hard to train a dog with poor structure to stand right.

Lenore: That's true, if they're made right, they usually walk into a perfect stack naturally. If they're made right, they don't have to stand perfectly every time to look good. They can have one foot off and still look good.

Mike: It's hard to mess up a good dog.

Lenore: But if you make it too serious, you take their attitude out of them.

How do you pull up the attitude?

Mike: She spoils them rotten.

Lenore: Make everything exciting and don't get on them too hard. The more time you

spend with them the better. Even with housebreaking, I never get onto them for that, it's just positive reinforcement when they do what you want them to do. You ignore poor behavior. In Labs, they're so people oriented, that if you just turn your back on them, some of them it just breaks their heart.

Do you negatively reinforce by turning your back?

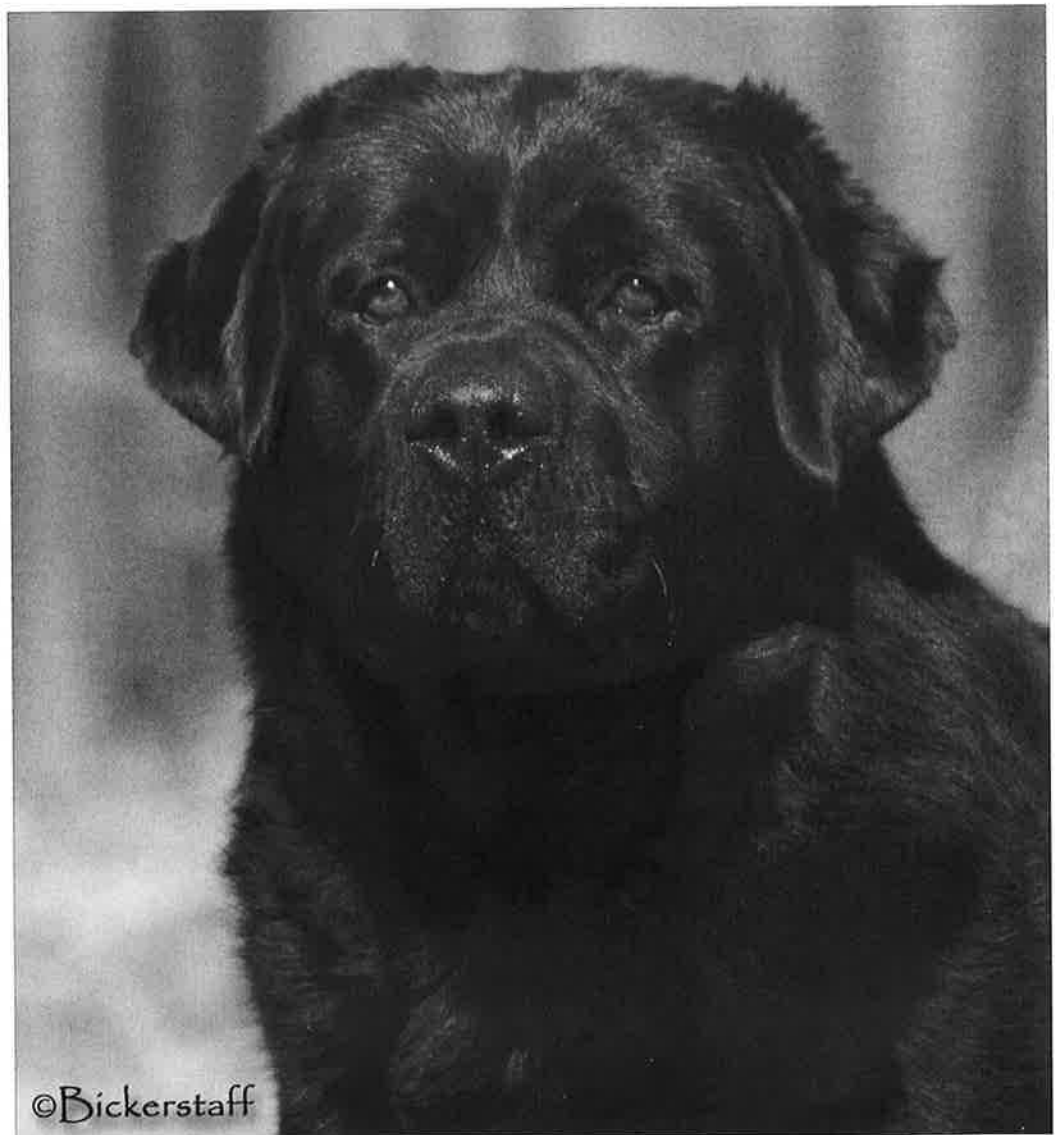
Lenore: I guess so. You don't praise bad behavior and you don't make a big deal over bad behavior. With retriever training, I start them at seven weeks by walking them down to the pond and a lot of times if they don't want to retrieve the first time in the water, you can make it a bigger issue than it is by trying to force them to go do

it. If I throw something out there and they don't want to go get it, which a lot of times that's common with a young puppy, I just ignore it and I'll go get an older dog, let them go get it and praise that older dog and that's all there is to it. After a few times, that puppy is going out there and getting it. If you make a big issue out of it it will usually get worse.

Mike: You know what makes a big issue out of it most times? Macho male attitudes and egos.

Lenore: I didn't want to say that. (laughter)

Mike: You know what I'm saying? I'm a macho man duck hunter trainer and I take my dog out there to the hunt test and he didn't wade out in the water and



Ch. Wits End Jacks or Better at Blackwing.

pick up the duck so I grab him up and shake him.

Lenore: Not Mike literally, other duck hunters.

Obviously! (laughter)

Mike: That's what happens. It's because, "He embarrassed me in front of my hunting buddies."

Lenore: My theory is in training, the show ring included, the hunt test included, if the dog screws up, it's not the dog's fault. It's the owner/trainer's fault, you didn't prepare the dog enough. You didn't do it the right way.

Is there a point where you stop spoiling them rotten to further the training and go on?

Lenore: Yes, once they're about six months. If I was going to do obedience training, that's when I say the serious training will start. But even then for me, harsh punishment is, "No," and a little swat on their nose. That's all I do to them. But then it is more serious and



Ch. Blackwing Super Freak, twelve years old.



Ch. Wits End Jacks or Better at Blackwing.

they're a little older emotionally and they can handle a little bit of discipline once they get a little older.

What else do you do to socialize them early on? Do you take them to different places?

Lenore: I take them to PetSmart, some other stores, walk them around in the stores. What helps us a lot is we have this conformation group. We have some really good friends with Newfoundlands and they go to the all breed shows and so we train one Sunday at our house, one Sunday at their house and just taking those new puppies and traveling that little way gets them used to a lot of stuff. Just bringing the puppies in the house is a big thing. If they're used to coming in your house, it's a major thing, but that's a foreign environment to puppies that are out in the kennel. If they just get used to coming in and out your front door, going up and down the steps, in a different environment helps a lot. If they can do that, they can come in here and go places and not really shake them up. It's just getting them used to going into different environments and still being secure, not being frightened of new things.

It was easier when our children were young, because children are always screaming and you never know what's going to be going on, or dropped, or banging. So now, we have our grandkids and that really helps a lot, but we'll try to make a loud noise or slam and bang something to just get them used to all kinds of stuff and not shaking them up.

Mike: Turn the vacuum cleaner on while they're in the house.

Lenore: I do that a lot, just turn the vacuum cleaner on. They learn that way that strange things are not a problem.

You wouldn't reward them for that?

Lenore: No, that kind of thing I don't reward.

What else do you do with puppies that other people may not do?

Lenore: I really don't know. I've not got into discussions with other people about how they raise puppies. One thing, you have to really be aware of your puppies and watch them. If you're keeping two, three or four puppies out of a litter, which we do a lot of times, there



Madilyn with Freaky, 2011.

almost always will be that one puppy who is a little more dominant and you have to be watching. There is a critical time period when that's going on that one will really start coming forward and the others will start lagging back, they just don't come out because that dominant puppy is going to get all the attention anyway.

So we're really conscious of that and if there's one that's doing that, we'll separate that puppy out. That may mean that puppy for 48 hours just stays in the house with us, away from all the other puppies. If you catch it early, it's not a problem. You can get them out of that, but you have to be watching your puppies and know what's going on and how they're interacting with each other and pick up on all that. I think we're probably pretty good at that. If I notice a problem with one, I'll tell Mike, "When you go down there, you need to make a special effort with this puppy." So we both work together.

I've never heard anyone say that before that they watch how they interact and separate them if they have to.

Lenore: That's a big deal for us. In that past with our kids, they liked dogs a lot and now our son and daughter-in-law and granddaughters live close to us, but they did live about three hours north. There was a time or two that if we had one that needed a little extra attention, we'd send it home with them and then pick it up four weeks later.

It would be changed?

Lenore: Yes.

That's interesting. Did you have something to add to that?

Mike: I was just going to say that everybody doesn't have to know everything we do. (laughter)

You don't want to give away all your secrets is that what you're saying? (laughter)

Mike: What Lenore has been talking about, those things I think are often overlooked and are actually some of the most important stuff when it comes to training and developing a young dog. It's all about developing that dog to his or her potential. What gets talked about a lot of times is nutrition and shots and worming, what I call routine stuff. We push puppies, we feed them and we push them to be all we can get out of them in terms



Ian and Bogart share a box and a kiss.

of substance and bone and we want a big, stout dog and to get a big, stout dog you have to feed a puppy and push it. People think if they overfeed or push too hard their dog is going to have joint problems and that type of thing. That's when genetic considerations come into play. It's not just a nutrition thing and I understand nutrition can contribute, but also let's face it, our goal is to breed and raise and develop a good show dog.

We've been very lucky with our dogs' joints, etc., it goes back to what we talked about, not compromising on what we breed. Then on the other hand, maybe we're pushing them a lot harder on nutrition than some other people are.

Lenore: Puppies have to have fat to grow on, if they don't, if you hold them back, they're never going to reach their full potential.

Do you start pushing them quickly, right after you wean them, and how do you wean them, what do you start feeding?

Lenore: We don't start weaning until about seven weeks.

Do you help the bitch, or do you let her do it naturally?

Lenore: We help. At about six weeks, she's in with them off and on, we may put her in there a couple times a day, leave her at night and kind of slowly wean them. They're nursing from probably six weeks to seven

weeks, they'll nurse about once a day. Then we introduce food at about three weeks.

Solid food?

Lenore: We soak it.

Kibble?

Lenore: Yes.

Mike: We have a set pro-

gram on how we feed and raise puppies. We use Ivermectin as a wormer at an early age. We use Panacur and Safeguard. Those protocols people know. Of course we give the routine vaccinations. We have always fed 50 percent Purina puppy

feed and 50 percent adult feed that's like a 30 percent protein, 20 percent fat. That's pretty much what we do. Right now we're using Native, which is a 30/20 feed and for many years we fed Exceed, they dropped the fat content on it down so we



Ch. Blackwing Santee.



GCh. Blackwing Izzy.

switched food. We look for that 30/20. I understand that there's a difference in ingredients, and I'm not saying there's not, but that base consideration on protein and fat is something you have to look at. When I say we push puppies, we probably feed a little higher protein and fat overall than a lot of people do.

Because you're doing a 50/50. Is the puppy food higher fat?

Mike: No, it's lower.

How long does that regimen go on?

Lenore: We feed them a 50/50 mixture until they're about twelve months.

Is it once a day?

Lenore: We feed twice a day until they're about six months, then we switch over to once a day.

Do you use any supplements?

Lenore: Occasionally. I do give Pet Tabs to the young puppies.

Mike: Just calcium phos-

phorous supplements on some puppies. I'm not a big proponent of supplements. It's just too much expense and trouble.

With nebulous results?

Mike: Exactly. It's undocumented. My background in ag and animal science, I need to base these decisions on research-based information and that's stuff is pretty ambiguous to me. Nobody proved it to me.

What incentive is there for anyone to do the research on it unless they make a lot of money? Isn't a lot of research driven by profit motivation with manufacturing companies?

Mike: That's a big problem when it comes to dogs and pets. The money's not there to do it. That very thing is what opens the door up for the snake oil salesmen.

Same thing in the health food industry.

Mike: Exactly. Where's there's a void and a lack of good research and information to base

your decision on, that's when the snake oil salesmen come in and convince you it's a good thing. You might really have good results that are not based on what that supplement did for you, you'd have had the result anyway, is what I'm trying to say.

Unless you set up some sort of experiment on your own.

Mike: And that's expensive and long-term and has to be replicated and very time-consuming, it's not going to happen.

How do you condition your dogs for the show ring?

Lenore: We have a pond behind the house. The ones we're going to show, I'll take down and start swimming them, exercising them.

Mike: Hardening them up and exercising them, that's part of it, but feeding is also part of it. Every dog is a little different. Their metabolism and their ability to hold weight. So we may

adjust on the feed in terms of percent fat especially to put more or less condition on a dog.

Lenore: I like them to be the same weight all the time, probably more than Mike does.

Mike: When we're not showing in the summertime, sometimes I like to take a little condition off of them. Then when we're getting ready to show, I call it putting the bloom on them, push them a little harder and they'll bloom. They'll add a little weight. That's a livestock thing. Show people, livestock people know that.

You normally keep ten to fifteen dogs?

Mike: I'd say fifteen to twenty.

Lenore: It's hard to stay below fifteen with old ones and puppies.

You've got about four lines going right now?

Lenore: I don't think I'd say we have four separate lines

going right now. We probably started with four, but they've all kind of come together. We have two or three bitches that are probably a little different, but it's more the same now than it was.

Talk about your achievements in the breed in terms of your top show dogs, some of your wins.

Lenore: Our first specialty win was at Hoosier with Ch. Blackwing Bramble, Winnie Limbourne gave her WB. We've won BOB at the Dallas specialty, and WD and WB there. We go to Piedmont a lot, we've won several things at Piedmont. Blackwing Super Freak was WB there.

Mike: Winning WD or WB or BOB at a specialty is a really big deal. It's nice and we get a real big charge out of it. But after all of that is over and we really reflect back, the important thing is the evaluation of the dog and from a breeding standpoint, the more we're in it, the more we go to shows. You really have to have your dog in that setting, that show environment and see that dog up against the best that the other breeders are bringing. When you see that, it's nice if the judge thinks you're the best one there that day. Sometimes that doesn't happen and it's because the judge has a different ideal and perception in their mind of what they're looking for. But you can go home just as happy with the way your dog looked in that group of 100 dogs it's competing against if you win or if you lose if you're solid in what you're looking for and you're measuring your own dog against everything else that's there. I like to win, I'm pretty competitive. But I also like to see what our dogs look like up against other breeders' dogs.

Lenore: Another thing that is really important is when you go to the shows compliment other breeders because there's only going to be three winners, WD, WB and BOB. A

lot of times we leave there just as happy if another breeder we respect takes the time to say, "That's a really nice puppy you have." In the Labrador community, more people need to be doing that, it means almost as much as winning if another well-respected breeder takes the time to come up and compliment you. You're also showing to the other exhibitors there and you

means a lot to me and Mike if someone takes the time to do that.

Talk about some of your most memorable wins. You won BOB at the Potomac last year.

Mike: Yes.

Nice! Was that the first time that happened?

Mike: Yes.

That must have been a thrill.

Mike: It was, big time.

are so many good breeders who have not won it. There's a lot of luck involved that plays into it, it's has to be the right judge, the right dog, you have to have just what that judge is looking for, the dog has to have a good day, there are so many things that come into play about it.

People dream about that. Was it one of your dreams?

Lenore: It was. It's still unbelievable to think that we were lucky enough to actually be there at the right place and the right time to win that.

Were one of you handling at the time?

Lenore: I was.

What was going through your mind?

Lenore: I'm really comfortable in the show ring. I really don't get nervous, but the year before we made it to the final three and this was with Big. I knew I was a little more nervous, just because I knew that it was probably his last shot at it because he was getting older and I'm really attached to that dog, he's my favorite one. It's even more special to be out there with one that you're really attached to and I was just thinking, "Don't mess up."

When you were pointed at, what did you do then? Did you just cry?

Lenore: I did cry. I think I hugged my dog. (laughter)

That was your biggest win?

Lenore: It was.

Mike: In our partnership Lenore focuses a lot on the dogs and I focus more on the bitches. Right now we've got a bitch that to me, is the best dog that we've ever had, Ch. Blackwing Izzy. She won two five-point majors both

days at Piedmont, then Breed once out of the classes. Then she went back this year and won BOB both days at Piedmont. So she's been pretty outstanding.



Izzy jumping.

never know how much that means to other people if you just compliment them if you really like their dog, and say something to them. I know it really

Lenore: It was unbelievable and it's still unbelievable when I really think about it. Because there were so many good dogs there. It's highly unlikely, there



Madilyn and Ian with pup.

Lenore: She finished with three five-point majors. She never puts a foot down wrong, you can count on her to do it right.

Who's judging Breed this year and what do you think your chances are?

Lenore: Clare Senfield is judging. I'm excited to show to Clare because I know she's going to do a good job judging. She's going to get in there and judge the dogs and put up what she likes.

Mike: She's the kind of judge that we like to show to because at the end of the day, she's going to pick out something she likes. It might not be our dog, but it's going to be something she really likes. She's got a long history in the breed with a lot of good dogs, so that's all you can ask out of a judge. Just like Lenore said, your dog might have a great day and might not have a great day. On any given day, that's kind of the luck of the draw. But if you have a judge who does what she'll do, that's all you can ask.

Lenore: In fact, at Potomac,

one reason winning it last year made it very memorable for me was that it was under Winnie Limbourne and we won our very first specialty under Winnie with Blackwing Bramble. Then to win Potomac under the judge who put us up at our first specialty was special to me.

What are some other memorable wins you've had or memorable moments in the ring?

Lenore: Probably with Raven.

Mike: Most of the funny ones is any time that we've had more than one dog that needed to be in the ring and I had to go with them. That's when the real humor starts.

Lenore: With Raven we went to the Dallas specialty and the reason we went, we had Blackwing Sherman and Marion Lyons was judging and he had done well under Marion before. He won a big Open Black class with about 40 males in it. He needed one point to finish, so we thought, "She's judging in Dallas, we'll take him down there." We got down there, there was five in his class, he

was fifth in the line, that's why we went down there. I was ready to go, I was like, "She's not going to like anything we have." Mike said, "No, we got one more bitch we're going to show." It was Raven, Blackwing Nevermore.

Mike: A Graemoor Tim daughter. I really liked her.

Lenore: I thought, "We're not going to do anything." I was just in the ring kind of goofing around. She went WB and BOS. I was ready to go home! When you go to one of these shows, thinking, "This is going to be a good day for this dog." It never fails, that one never wins. It's something that was totally unexpected.

Mike: Back when we bred to Ruffy the first time and Kendall was in Pennsylvania, I was talking to her, and we go out to dinner sometimes with other breeders, they'll say, "Mike tell your story about when you bred to Ruffy." This story is a little bit of an indictment on me maybe and I qualify myself with an animal science background and worked for a

veterinarian for about three years while I was in college.

Anyway, we went to Memphis to ship a female to Kendall. We got to the airport at about five o'clock in the morning and Lenore was in the freight office checking the dog into air freight and I was out there walking her around and getting her to go the bathroom before the trip. She's kind of a country dog and I unsnapped her off the leash and she was walking around. Lenore came out of the air freight office and she took off across the parking lot in a run and here came a big Lincoln Continental and hit her! It knocked her down and I ran out there and got her and this really nice guy got out. "I'm so sorry!" I said, "It's my fault, she got loose." He went on and Lenore was about to pass out in the parking lot. I got her over there and I was walking her around on the grass and Lenore said, "What are we going to do?" I said, "I'll check her over. There's no broken legs, no broken shoulders, I'm going to walk her around." She wasn't peeing any blood, she wasn't convulsing or anything so I said, "We just have to calm down a minute." About 30 minutes later I told Lenore, "I'm putting her on that airplane." So we put her on the airplane, shipped her to Pennsylvania.

Lenore: We had planned a whole day in Memphis, shopping and eating out.

Mike: We were driving home after we put the dog on the plane, we were sick about what had happened. We started back to Arkansas when I realized I had to call Kendall, who I didn't even know and tell her I shipped a dog to her that got hit by a car! (laughter) Which really wasn't easy. I called Kendall and told her, she was like, "Okay." She told me she took somebody to the airport with her to help carry her out in case she was dead or something. Anyway, she was fine, she jumped out of the crate and Kendall said she put both paws up on her shoulder and licked her in the face. She was probably glad to be away from me! She bred her and sent her back. We had thirteen puppies. I called Kendall after the puppies were born and I told her, "Kendall, she did great, she whelped thirteen puppies, twelve

of them are alive and when she had that thirteenth puppy I thought she was done. That's all the puppies. All of a sudden she kind of started to try to whelp something else and she whelped a hood ornament off that Lincoln Continental." Kendall got kind of quiet and then said, "Really?" I said, "No." (laughter)

Lenore: Betty Graham and Kendall both lived in the Northeast, and of course we were in Arkansas. We didn't know this at the time, but years later they said every time Mike would call one of them, they'd call each other and say, "Did that guy Mike Hamilton from Arkansas call you again?"

Mike: That crazy guy from Arkansas.

Lenore: Several years later we went to the National Specialty in Waukesha, Wisconsin. They didn't know we were going to be there. We got there and somehow we figured out which one was Kendall, Mike introduced himself. The first thing Kendall said was, "You have to wait right here. Don't move. I have to go get Betty and have her look at you." (laughter) Betty called the other night, I had never heard Betty's side of the story. She said that she was inside the building and she said, "I've never seen Kendall move that fast in my life. She came running at me hollering, 'Betty, Betty, he's here! He's here, he's out there, he's waiting, you have to get down there and look at him!'" (laughter)

Mike: I would call Betty and Kendall both and say, "How much does Arnold weigh, how tall is he?" The stuff you think is really important, the quantifying part of the equation I thought was really important, she would never tell me. I'd get off the phone and I'd be so mad I'd say, "I know she knows what that dog weighs, she just won't tell me." So that day in Wisconsin I said, "What dogs have you got?" She had Arnold there and I said, "I want to go out to the van and look at him." She got him out of the van and was getting ready to put him back up in the van in the crate, and being a southern gentleman I thought, "I'm not going to let her lift that dog, I'm going to lift that dog up in there." I got hold of him and I lifted him up and when I

heaved him up into the crate, I hit my head on the top of the van door and it about knocked me out, I was seeing stars and I was just about to fall out. Kendall said, "How much does he weigh?" I said, "About 800 pounds at least." (laughter)

Lenore: You have to tell Tom Shearer's story.

Mike: Tom Shearer at the time was judging Sweepstakes and I'm pretty much known for not paying attention. However, I pay more attention to the ring than I let on.

Lenore: You can always hear him talking, you can always hear his voice.

Mike: Ringside chatter.

Another breeder from Arkansas came up and I really don't even remember what she was telling me, but it was something pretty outlandish. I was standing there and I said, "You've got to be kidding!" It really happened at a bad time because Tom was handing Lenore the Best in Sweeps ribbon. He thought I was saying, "You gotta be kidding" because he was giving her the ribbon.

Lenore: The second he started to hand me the ribbon Mike yells out, "You've gotta be kidding me!" Tom just stood there with the ribbon and he looked over at Mike and he said, "You want to rethink this?"

I turned around and said, "Shut up, Mike!"

Mike: Lenore and I know Jim Bowron, Fortune Labadors, back when we first started and he came to Arkansas. He was going to school at Ole Miss and he had his dog, Ch. Broad Reach Bocephus JH, who was a great dog, he was the number one Labrador in 1992 in the U.S. But more important to me, he was a Dickendall Ruffy son and he was the top. We'd go to the show in Little Rock and I do the same thing even today, I was going down the line thinking, "We can beat that dog, we could beat this dog, we could beat that dog." I'm analyzing every dog



Lenore and Madilyn with a pup.

in the class and where we stack up. Rusty Howard was out there showing Bocephus and I got down to look at him and I thought, "We ain't got a snowball's chance in Hades beating this dog." He was beautiful. Jim was just this college kid. After Bocephus won the show, we congratulated Rusty. Jim said that finished him. I told Jim, "That's a really good thing, because we won't have to face him again."

We took a bitch over to Ole Miss to breed to Bocephus after that. We value the females we've worked to breed and develop and we got over there and Jim's living the good college life and ...

Lenore: All these guys running around.

Mike: Lenore said, "You really think it's safe to leave her here?" I said, "I used to live like that, so yeah." Jim's been a good friend of ours.

You mentioned that you were involved with University of Arkansas. What were you doing?

Mike: I started there in '72 and got a Bachelor's degree and then I got a Master's. I worked for the university for 32 years in extension services and during that time I worked with youth livestock programs and adult livestock, ag-related stuff. That's pretty much what I did for 32 years and then I retired from there. Very little overlap between, there's some common things, but our dog life wasn't really part of my career.

What is there left for you two to accomplish in the breed?

Lenore: My biggest dream was just to be lucky enough to win Potomac one year. Now that I've won once, it'd be nice to win it again. (laughter)

Once wasn't satisfying enough? (laughter)

Lenore: Well, if you can win it again, it would be like it wasn't by accident, that you are able to breed a good dog.

Mike: Goal-wise, over time, we've definitely raised the quality of the dogs that we've got and



Big, BOB, DFWLRC.

we started out at a pretty low level. I think that the better your dogs get, the harder it is to maintain that and improve on it. It's harder to stay there than it is to get there, in my mind.

Lenore: If you're not there, you're always going up. You can always make progress. Once you've kind of got what you like, it's really hard finding dogs to fit in with what you've got to maintain where you are.

Mike: You're going one of two directions, you're either going up or down. You're never staying the same.

Once you're up, there's nowhere to go but down?

Mike: I want to keep going up. I just don't know where up is at. (laughter) There's an old saying in leadership, "I'm the leader, which way did they go?" It's hard, all breeders are trying to do the same thing - get better. It's really hard to do and you can't always do it. My goal would be to keep getting better. Do a better job on some of these things and do a better job on emerging health issues and to keep a good quality dog. We sometimes judge Sweepstakes and it's a big honor to be asked to do that. At some point in time we might want to get a license and judge regular classes. Right now Lenore and I talk a lot about it but we're still having a lot of fun breeding dogs and

exhibiting.

Lenore: We really like raising puppies and just being around the puppies and going and showing and being around the people right now. I'd like to enjoy where we're at for a little longer.

Mike: You have to understand yourself and what you enjoy and get out of it rather than what somebody else thinks you ought to be doing. After winning Potomac last year, people said, "When are you going to get your judge's license?" Well, that's nice of them to say that, but really what we might enjoy doing is just keep on breeding dogs and exhibiting. We might not ever win anything like that again, but we still enjoy it. It's that big challenge I was talking about, putting it all together, it's not easy.

Lenore: We owe a lot of people, we could not have gotten to where we're at without the help of a lot of people in the Labrador community. Maureen Gamble helped us a lot, Kendall Herr, Betty Graham, Nancy Arbuckle and Faith Hyndman have helped us. Nobody would reach the success that they have if it wasn't for other people to fall back on. If you have a problem you really need the support of all the other Lab people out there. I don't think we would have done as well as we have if

it hadn't have been for the help of all these people.

Mike: There are some new breeders in Arkansas, Louisiana, our area and if we can do anything to help them, I want to try to do that. Our part of the country years ago was kind of seen as a wasteland in terms of breeding a good dog, if you weren't from the Northeast or the West Coast, you couldn't have a good dog. They were probably right, but things have changed and I think we have a lot of good, young breeders and supporting them and helping them the way they want to be helped, not forcing it

on them, is the thing to do. We've had a lot of people like the ones Lenore mentioned, who have really helped us a lot.

Lenore: We enjoy the dogs, but if wasn't for the friendship of all the people we've met, I don't know that we'd still be coming back. Part of the reason that I look forward to coming to these shows is seeing people we don't get to see very often. If it wasn't for that, I don't know that anybody would keep doing it if you didn't have friends and look forward to going out to dinner and doing things with people at the shows.

Mike: It's not so much just dealing with dogs, it's anything that you deal with in life. Sometimes we get to talking and looking at the few little negative things that happen and if you really take a step back and look at the big picture, there's a heck of a lot more positive. Labrador Retrievers are way better now than they were twenty years ago. That's because of a lot of good breeders who have done a lot of great things.

Dog breeding is a sickness that you can't hardly get over. You get all engrossed in it and it's like getting a disease that can't be cured. Maybe it keeps you from a life of crime or something. (laughter)

Thank you very much. •