

# Labrador people

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

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

*Tell us a little about your background.*

Lenore: I grew up in Springdale, Arkansas. I stayed home with the kids and took care of the dogs.

*How many kids do you have?*

Lenore: We have two, Jeff Hamilton and Julie Fise. We also have a daughter-in-law, Vanessa, a son-in-law, Jake, and three grandkids Madilyn, Ian and Lilah.

*How did you two meet?*

Lenore: We met at a vet clinic.

Mike: It's kind of a dog story.

*Let's hear it!*

Mike: While I was going to college I worked at a veterinary clinic for about three years, mostly evenings and weekends. Lenore's sister also worked there. Lenore came in one day with her dog and I asked her out.

*You caught a glimpse of her and decided to ask her out?*

Mike: Yes. (laughter) I asked her sister out two or three times but her sister was kind of mean and she had a boyfriend anyway so she would never go out with me. Then Lenore came in and I said, "I like Lenore better anyway." (laughter)

*What did you end up doing for a career?*

Mike: I was raised on a farm in West Point, Arkansas. I always say I graduated West Point. (laughter) It was the sixth grade, but ... (laughter) It's not really that funny. Anyway, I have a Bachelor's and Master's in animal science from the University of Arkansas. I went to work with the Cooperative Extension Service which is part of the university land grant system. It's working with 4-H clubs and advising farmers. I



*Hamilton family.*

did a lot of work with livestock producers. I worked for that organization for 32 years. I retired when I was 55 which was about two years ago, so I'm enjoying retirement, hunting and fishing and doing the jobs Lenore lays out around the house and trying to stay out of trouble.

*Once you got married and started raising kids, how did you get into dog showing? Was it with the Labs or was it another breed?*

Mike: Where I was raised it was a big duck hunting area around Stuttgart, Arkansas and I grew up duck hunting. Lenore and I both liked dogs and wanted dogs so we started shopping around and decided to try to buy a Labrador Retriever. We fell in love with the breed. My dad had raised bird dogs and I'd had all kinds of Beagles, hounds and Coon dogs as a kid. Our

Lab was the first dog I'd ever owned in my life that just wanted to please me ... every day they want to please you. That's the biggest thing about a Lab, they're like, "What can I do to make my owner happy today?"

Lenore: Our son was twelve months old when we got our first dog.

*Did you mainly look at the Lab because of the duck hunting? You wanted a retriever and you wanted that personality over some of the other dogs that could do the same thing?*

Mike: We visited some other breeds, Chesapeake and others. The particular dogs we looked at, the temperament wasn't what we wanted with a family. We went with a Lab. It was a field trial type bred dog, it wasn't really a dog to show, but he was a great dog, we had him until the day he died.

*What was his name?*

Mike: Buster. We got him in about 1978 and he lived until he was twelve years old.

*How did you go from this dog, to getting to a more conformation type dog? Or are your dogs multi-purpose?*

Lenore: It was a slow process. After we got Buster I began spending the afternoons training him. When I was growing up we had Chihuahuas I spent a lot of time training them to do tricks, so I was glad to have a dog to work with again. When Mike got home from work he was disappointed that he did not get to do the training on Buster. When Mike started taking Buster hunting with him his friends saw how well trained Buster was and asked Mike if I would train dogs for them. That is how we started training for other people.

*What were you training them to do?*

Lenore: Basic obedience, sit, stay, heel, come, and retriever training for duck hunting. We took in dogs, all different breeds that I trained for other people. Most of the training was obedience. We also trained quite a few bird dogs, getting them started.

Mike: A lot of the field work training for trials is very intense, but our experience has been, if you teach a dog basic obedience and then you put them out in the field and hunt them, shoot ducks over them, they learn a lot on their own. They have a lot of ability and they learn pretty fast in the field. The more you hunt them, the faster and the more they learn.

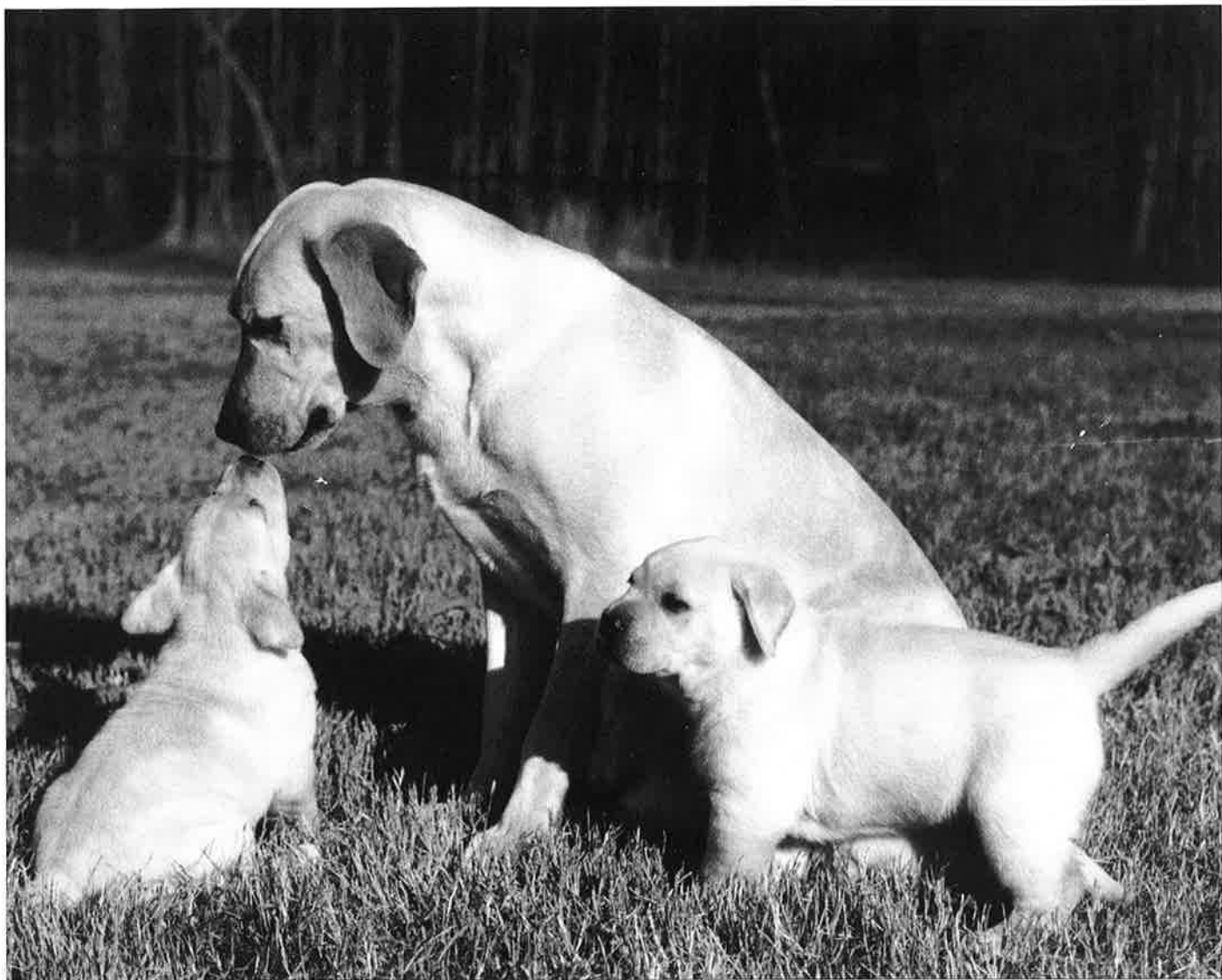
*They pick it up watching other dogs?*

Mike: The experience and other dogs sometimes will help on certain things, especially if the other dog is well-trained. Another dog could be detrimental to training if they're not well-trained.

Lenore: The show lines we discovered were easier to train than the field trial lines. I could train them in half the time.

*That's interesting.*

Lenore: As we started raising puppies of our own, we'd keep two or three out of each litter. If they didn't work out to



Ch. Autumn Dawn On Blackwing, "Taz," Mike and Lenore's first champion.

show, we would start training those that we weren't going to keep and sell them as started dogs. We realized they were so much easier to handle than what we had been taking in. Then we totally quit training other lines and just stayed with ours. We only trained what we bred and sold for a long time.

Mike: I had a really good friend who raised and ran field trial bird dogs. You train a field trial bird dog, that makes a Labrador Retriever look like a genius. They're pretty hard to train. It takes a lot more time and patience to train a bird dog.

*From all this field work, how did you discover the show lines and what got you interested in conformation?*

Mike: I had a good friend of mine we trained with. We'd go two or three times a week, he

was training his dogs and I was training. Lenore would do a lot of the obedience and then I would do the field work with the birds and shooting over them. He and I would go and work practically every weekend. He had a Lab that his wife had showed and finished and she was beautiful. They divorced and he wound up with the dog. He wasn't really doing anything with her from a breeding standpoint. With my background in animal breeding I thought, "This is a waste." I told him, "I'm going to find a really nice dog to breed her to and I want a puppy back out of her." So that's what we did and the puppy we got back was pretty successful in the ring, that's how it started.

*What lines were those?*

Mike: It was a lot of Sunnybrook Acres, Fran Ippensen, in Springfield, Missouri, and at the time we lived in Fayetteville, Arkansas which is very close. Maureen Gamble had the stud dog that we bred to, Ch. Nimloth Black Jack, so it was some stuff in that area that was nice lines that we started.

*Did you stick with those lines? Was that first puppy your foundation dog for your show lines?*

Lenore: Really we probably had three or four foundation bitches. We didn't just stick with one, we had several.

*Did you have different lines going at the same time? Was that for health or was it that certain things were compatible, certain things maybe weren't compatible? Do you think you have an edge with your background in animal science and breeding?*

Mike: I'd like to think so. I don't know. I think that part of it is a product of when you first start you really don't know what type you're going to settle on. There's lots of variations within the breed in terms of type and the dogs that were available that we started with were really sound, excellent structure, but probably some of them lacked the type, especially the first bitch that we had. She did well in all breed shows, but she wasn't a specialty type. Then as we got more involved, and actually started reading the different publications on Labs and looking at type, we saw some dogs that we liked the type better. A lot of those went back to Dickendall, Kendall Herr's line. Lenore and I both saw a picture of Ruffy. We said, "That's the type of dog



Ch. Blackwing Bramble, Mike and Lenore's first specialty winner.

we want." We worked to improve the type on the females we had, but we also brought in some other females that were more like that type.

*At the time was it hard to find bitches that were like that, that you could get your hands on?*

Lenore: Yes, it wasn't like what we wanted, but you just couldn't buy a bitch, so we started from the ground up and just kept breeding and kept a puppy out of every litter and worked our way up. It would have been a lot easier if we could have just went and bought a bitch like what we wanted, but when you're new and just getting started, people are hesitant to sell to you.

*That seems like it could be hit or miss whether you ever get what you're after if you can't get that type right away or you get something close and*

*then just try to go closer and closer.*

Lenore: You just keep breeding to the type of stud dog that you like.

Mike: The advantage is that if you know several generations behind the bitch that you're showing, then you've got a lot of knowledge about her. What there is behind her and what you feel like she'll produce on down the line and also what the strengths and weaknesses are so you know what maybe you need help on. If you buy something, you may not have that knowledge. But buying and starting with the best thing that you can is a lot cheaper, it costs you a lot of money breeding and raising and working from the bottom up, if you will.

*How did you two make the breeding decisions together? Was it a mutual back and forth, and were you*

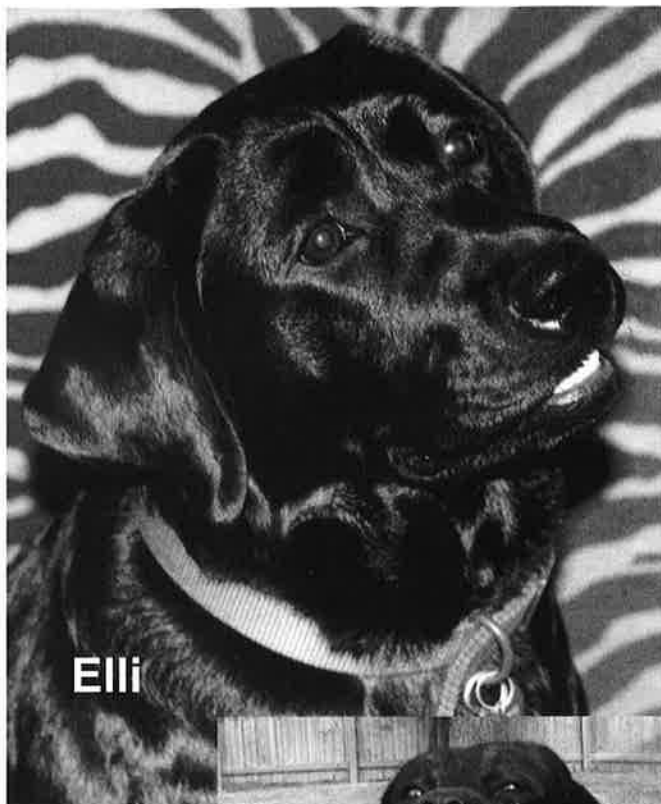
*looking at phenotype, genotype? How did you settle on something? What's your process?*

Lenore: We usually like the same type dogs. We discuss it, but that's one way we probably have a little advantage, there's two of us. There's one that I like, he'll see something that I didn't see, or if there's one he likes, I'll notice something, so we talk about it back and forth, but we have always agreed on what we've bred to.

Mike: It's not easy. It's a judgment call and it's really good to have two opinions on something like that, two sets of eyes looking at them.

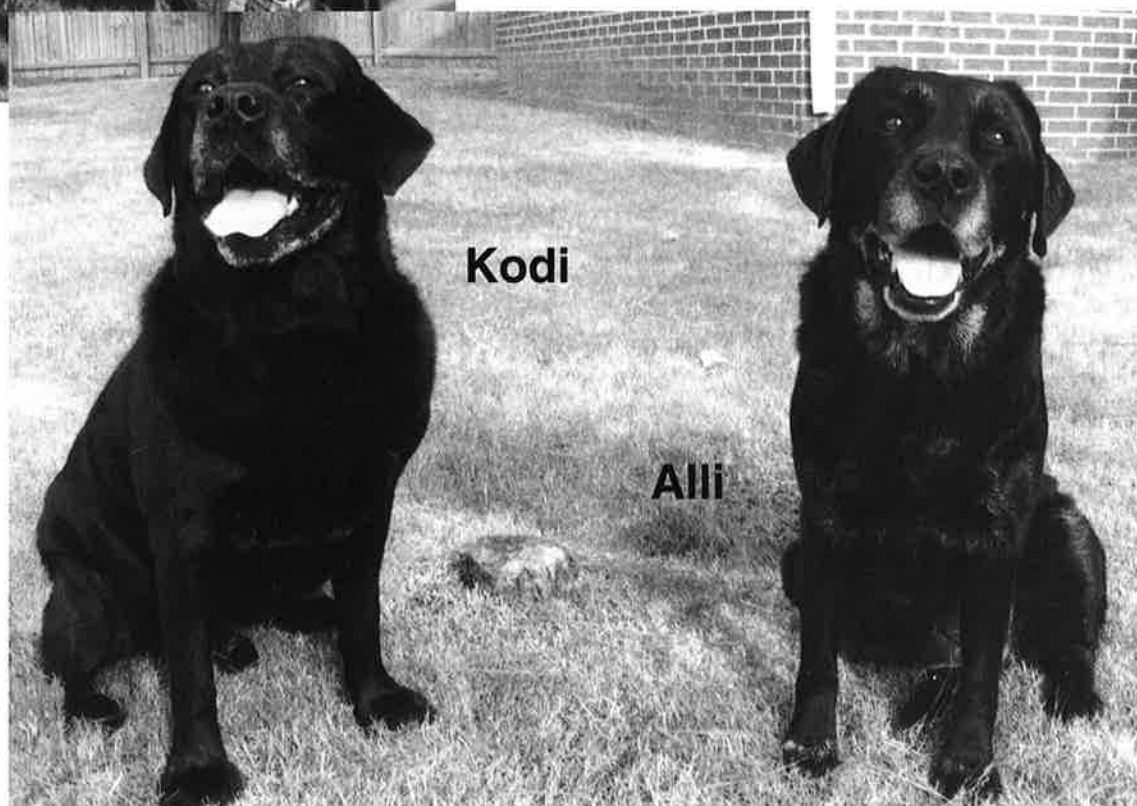
This phenotype, genotype thing, can you really separate all of that out? I don't personally think so. I think that's kind of an abstract discussion that maybe has some merit, but

maybe just a little. (laughter) Phenotype is an expression of the genotype, given a certain environment, but phenotype is the best indicator you have of what the genotype is. Those genes that are expressed is what you're seeing in the phenotype, so why would you ever deny it? You've got to look at the dog is what I'm trying to say. What we lead into a lot of times is a discussion over do you look at the dog or do you study the pedigree? You have to do both, the more information you have, the better decision you can make. When you look at that pedigree, if you've actually seen the dogs in that pedigree, it helps you even more to make your decision and base it on that. Genetics is something that people get all wrapped up about and when you really get right



**Elli**

*Mike & Lenore,  
you are very  
special to us!*



**Kodi**

**Alli**

*We are very proud to have been a small part of Blackwing.  
Alli (sister to Super Freak) was my best friend, passed last May.  
Kodi is 10 and our new Elli is just over a year.  
What a great piece to the puzzle of life these pups have provided for us.  
~ Elgin, Rachel, Alli, Kodi, and Elli Hamner ~*



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down to it, what we know is just a little bit.

We get to talking about coat color and a few health issues and things like that, you get past that and you really don't know a lot. (laughter) So you're right back to looking at the dogs and then looking at the pedigrees and trying to glean as much information as you can.

*For instance, if you had a bitch you wanted to breed to, say you want to outcross, you're looking at the pedigree and you see something back there that disturbs you, but the dog itself is fantastic, how do you weigh something like that out?*

Lenore: If it's past three generations I really don't worry too much about it.

*Say it's within three generations?*

Lenore: If it's the sire or dam, I'd worry about it.

*Do you think you'd still go with the breeding if you really like a dog?*

Lenore: It depends on how good the dog is.

*I always wonder if people look at pedigrees, but then they sort of think, "I like the dog, I'm just going to do it."*

Mike: It's a judgment call. You have to weigh it and sometimes what you would stand to gain might be worth so much to you that you would take that chance. But sometimes it depends on what the particular issue is. You might not be willing to do it, so it's an individual decision. That's why a lot of times you have other breeders or new breeders asking your opinion on something. Well, what my opinion is on a particular bitch of ours to breed to, may not have a thing to do with what they need to be doing. So it's about individual decisions.

We've learned sometimes what we get in terms of phenotype is more like the grandparents than parents. Those first generations are important.

*You have that in your mind to look at the grandparents?*

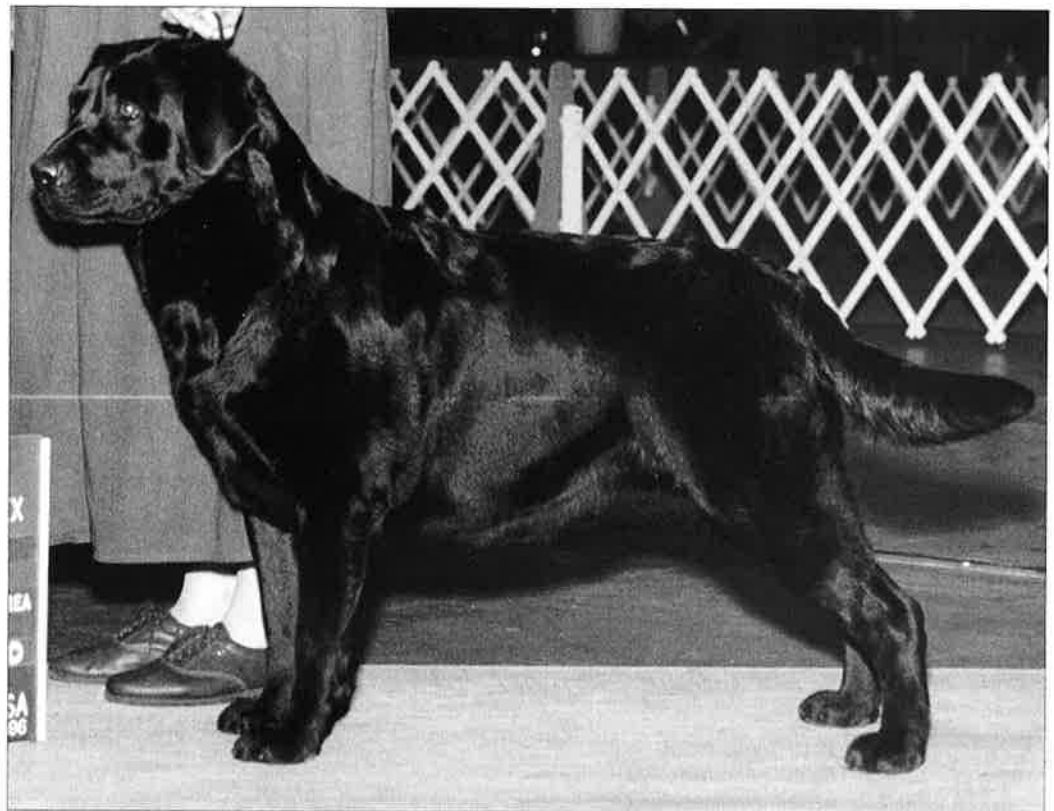
Mike: I want to look at pictures of them, see them in person, talk to people who own them, know them, and know as much first hand information as you can know about them. The more information you have, the better decision you can make.

*You've seen it over and over that they resemble the grandparents more?*

*Right: Blackwing Nevermore, BOS, Ft. Worth-Dallas Specialty, 1999.*



*Blackwing Jackson, thirteen months old, 1996.*





*Ch. Blackwing Lafitte, Best in Sweeps, Spirit of St. Louis LRC, 2004.*

Lenore: Even more now with our line than ever before. We've got grandkids that look more like the grandparents than they do the sire and dam, so much so that we kind of forget, and think, "That's not her dam but her granddam." We have several that are like that.

Mike: One thing I'll say about that, when you analyze,

you can get analysis paralysis. (laughter) It seems to me that people analyze, analyze, analyze and then they make their decision, but too many times the decision made, a particular dog that they're going to go to or a bitch that they're going to buy or whatever, they wind up being made based on what's easy and handy, close to home, eco-

nomics and other things that really don't have anything to do with breeding a good dog. The animal breeding aspect of it is considered, but it's not what ultimately makes the decision. If you're not basing your decision on things that are going to create that ideal dog you're shooting for, it's going to take you a long time to get there.

*How long do you think it took you to go from ground zero to getting a really good dog?*

Lenore: How many years? Or how many litters? Was it your first litter? What was the learning curve for you?

Lenore: Ten years ago I probably would have thought, "These puppies are better and we're really doing good." Now

we look back and think, "No, they're way better now." I don't know that we're to where we want to be right now. Hopefully, we just keep getting better and better.

Mike: For us it's been at least a ten-year window, maybe fifteen, from start to finish and it might be longer than that to the point of never if it wasn't for some producers like Dickendall Arnold and some dogs like him that really fixed a lot of things quickly for us. It is a building process and it takes time.

*How many litters have you bred over the years and how many champions do you have?*

Lenore: I don't know how many litters. We only have one or two litters a year, sometimes we'll go a year and not even have a litter.

Mike: We've had years that we didn't have litters and then

we've had times that we've had two litters on the ground at the same time and kill ourselves. You balance it with showing and developing the good puppies that you think you have at the time. Then when you work through them you may want to breed another litter and try to get some more puppies to show. It varies, we don't have a set program where we're breeding on a regular basis.

Lenore: I don't know how many champions we've produced. Not that many.

Mike: I'd say between ten and fifteen.

*Of those you've had some nice specials.*

Mike: We started out doing a lot of all breed shows. We would finish some dogs at all breed shows. That's back to what we were talking about type and those dogs might have real-

ly been structurally correct and nice dogs but they weren't the type we could show at specialties. Now we pretty much go to specialties. We have a female right now that won three straight five-point majors at specialties and finished in about a two-week period of time.

Lenore: When we first started out we did pretty much all breed shows, but we always knew what type we liked and it was more the specialty type dog. When we bred we were always breeding towards that type dog and we really didn't go to any specialties. We'd been breeding to a lot of Kendall Herr's dogs and when we started breeding to Arnold, Mike told Kendall, "We're just not winning shows at all anymore, we're at the last of the line." We didn't start going to specialty shows until Kendall said, "That's because

you need to be at specialties now, you've got a specialty type dog." That's when we started going to the specialties.

*You bred to Arnold?*

Mike: I bred to Arnold ... well, we bred to Arnold, anytime I say "I," I mean Lenore and I. Lenore does all the work and I take all the credit. (laughter) I always say we bred to Arnold so many times I thought about changing the name of our kennel to Arnoldville.

Lenore: I think we bred to Ruffy more times than we did to Arnold. Mike always had the philosophy: breed to what produced the dog you like. Well, Ruffy produced Arnold, so we bred to Ruffy four or five times. Then we finally bred to Arnold and when we bred to him, we made a big jump in type in one breeding.

Mike: Ruffy helped us a lot.



Ch. Blackwing Santee, BOS, Spirit of St. Louis LRC, 2005.



## BISS, CH. BLACKWING LAFITTE (Imp. USA)

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Trendmaker's Mugwump  
Trendmaker's Tycoon  
Trendmaker's Traffic Jam  
**Dickendall Davaron Amigo**  
Ch. Dickendall Arnold  
Dickendall Davaron Amuse  
Waterbound River Witch

Ch. Dickendall Ruffy  
Ch. Dickendall Arnold  
Dickendalls A-Ha  
**Blackwing Tally Ho**  
Ch. Graemoor Bombay  
Blackwing Moonlight Bay  
Blackwing Midnight Annie

"Emmett" arrived in NZ 2010

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*Thank you, Mike and Lenore, for our lovely boy!*

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You have to realize too, some of the bitches that we were breeding to Ruffy weren't as good and as much type as some of the stuff we went back to Arnold with.

Lenore: When we bred to Arnold, we bred the typiest bitch we had and we kept three out of that litter.

*That was a pivotal point?*

Mike and Lenore: Yes.

*You knew when you were going there, that's what you were hoping for?*

Mike: Yes. We felt Arnold had the things we needed.

*What did he have?*

Mike: He had substance and type.

Lenore: He had the front and rear angles. It seemed like

no matter who bred to him there would be at least one good one out of every litter, no matter if the bitch had a different pedigree.

Mike: He was a producer. As Lenore said, you took different type bitches to him and he'd stamp out the one that looked like what you wanted. That goes back to genotype-phenotype we talked about. He had to have a lot of homozygosity in his genes, in other words he had a lot of like genes for good traits. When he was bred, he'd pass that on. You just don't know that, the only way you know that is looking at progeny. His progeny were looking pretty good.

*How were his progeny produc-*

*ing?*

Mike: There's an old saying: the fruit doesn't fall far from the tree. You'd like to think it's very close, but I think a lot about, how long does it take to diffuse the genetics that you have? That's the issue. How much do you need to bring in from outcrosses and how much does that help you or hurt you? That's a pretty complex animal breeding discussion, but it's the things you have to think about and try to work around. It's not simple.

*How long did that take, that process of starting to breed to Ruffy and then breeding to Arnold and getting what you wanted? Was it just a couple years?*

Lenore: No, it was longer

than that. We bred several times to Ruffy.

Mike: Kendall was in Pennsylvania the first time I ever talked to her. There are some crazy stories about that. Betty Graham, Graemoor, was in Virginia and we really wanted to breed to Receiver when he was first here. I knew he was a nice dog. It's kind of hard to say this, but I didn't think we had a bitch good enough to breed to him. Then after he was gone, we started looking at sons out of him. Dickendall Ruffy, of course, was one of the first ones Kendall had that was winning and Betty had a dog named Graemoor Bombay that was a Receiver son. We bred a couple of females we had to those dogs and that started the ball rolling. We didn't make a big step necessarily from the standpoint of going to the specialties, but we really improved the type and we kept females out of that and kept working towards it with those females. It's a long process. We got lucky that Kendall moved to Texas and instead of being in Pennsylvania, fifteen, eighteen hours from us, she's in Texas and she's six hours from us, so that was a big help.

*In your case, with your lines that you have, when is outcrossing appropriate and I'm assuming you're doing tons of linebreeding at this point, but how often are you going out, and talk a little bit about what you need to have in order to do an outcross?*

Lenore: Early on it was all outcrossing and we're just now getting to where we're doing a little bit of linebreeding.

*Just now, 30 years into it?*

Lenore: Yes, because until recently we've never felt like breeding to our own stud dogs. We've never felt that ours were good enough. We're just now getting to where we feel that some of our own males are good enough and we're using them on our own bitches. A lot of our males and bitches are now so closely related that we're at a point where we have to start outcrossing a little bit more.

*What are you looking for when you're looking at your outcross? What criteria must be met?*

Lenore: I don't want to lose the type that we've finally gotten.

*Do you try to find something as similar as possible?*

Lenore: Yes.

*Can it be a complete outcross in*



Lenore and Big win Potomac in 2010.



*BISS, Ch. Blackwing Superfine, "Big," BOB, LRCP, 2010.*

*terms of pedigree?*

Lenore: Yes, but it still has to look like the type we like.

*Can you find that out there?*

Lenore: It's hard.

Mike: It's a dilemma because nine times out of ten, when we see the type that we like and then we look at the pedigree, it's that type for a reason, because it's related. So it's really hard.

*Do you figure out the coefficients of inbreeding and all that?*

Mike: No. I understand the benefits of outcrossing and trying to maintain as much diversity in the genetics as you can from a health standpoint and other concerns. But the reality is when you start looking for something that's the type that you want, you're going to wind up with something that's got some of that same bloodline in it, there's no way around it.

*Even if it's related to your stuff, how do you figure out how much of it is acceptable and how much isn't?*

Lenore: A lot of it depends on what dog is in common in the pedigree. There's some that

I don't care how much of that dog is in the pedigree.

Mike: It goes back to a lot of things, and for me, if you've

got that great producer back there like Arnold was, I might



*Big.*

be willing to take more of that dog than I would something that was hit and miss all over the board in terms of the type that the dog produced because you're looking at possibly doubling up and getting that miss. That's a consideration and health things are a consideration and you're weighing all that. It's what you're comfortable with as a breeder. People are comfortable with different things so you try to do the best you can. You want to try to maintain as much diversity as you can. You've got that in the back of your mind and work to that and if you see something out there that's really nice that's an outcross, you have to take advantage of it and try. If we've got four or five females in our kennel in a given time that we're breeding there might be one of those that I'm more willing to linebreed on her, but then I've got another female over here I know she's got to have an outcross. A lot of it depends on what she brings to the table. It

makes your head hurt, to be honest with you. It's a sickness that you don't get over very easily and it's an expensive sickness. (laughter) You spend your life, you sit at home at night thinking about these things, there's no good answers to some of those.

*I don't know how people do it!*

Lenore: To really be successful at it, you have to love it. It's your hobby, it's what you enjoy doing. If you go at it thinking you just want to win dog shows or try and make some extra money, those people don't last as long.

Mike: It's a challenge and there's a lot of satisfaction in doing it. The big challenge is to take into account all these breeding considerations, get that puppy on the ground, but once you've got that puppy born, nobody's better than Lenore at developing that puppy into a really confident, well-socialized, well-trained animal that goes in that ring and performs. Don't kid yourself, dog shows are a

performance. It's about a three-minute performance for that handler and that dog. Lenore gets them to that point. When you are successful you get a lot of satisfaction out of that.

Lenore: You can breed a really nice dog, but it may never win a show. You have to develop it, it has to be well-socialized, it's easy to screw up a good dog. You have to give them fresh water every day, exercise, all the health stuff you have to do, taking care of it, you have to feed it right and then along with socializing it, training that dog. If they're not handled just right they end up being scared and not liking to get out and go show. Then all that breeding is for nothing if you can't raise it and handle it right.

*How do you sort out type, temperament and soundness? What's more important?*

Lenore: They're all important, but we can't keep every puppy. Most of ours go into pet homes, so I would say temperament is probably first, then

health and type.

Mike: They go primarily into pet situations, but where we live, a lot of people train them to hunt. They're mostly a pet, but they take them hunting two or three times a year. Temperament to me is more of an issue because they're going to live with us, they're probably going to live around ten or fifteen other dogs, we can't have anything with a bad temperament. We've been really fortunate that we've had such good temperament, but occasionally we would have an individual that wouldn't do well in a kennel situation or around other dogs and it's just not a good temperament. Maybe they'd go into a one-dog family where they're getting all the attention and be okay or with a hunter and be trained and just with that training, then they're okay. We've had dogs that were Sweepstakes winners that start developing that temperament that we would place and not breed.

Lenore: We've always



*Blackwing Phoebe.*



Ch. Blackwing Bluffdale Memphis.

culled extremely hard. When we were still trying to get that type that we wanted, we've occasionally had one that started winning, but the temperament, I don't know what happened. We've made no excuses, we can't breed this. We don't want to take a chance on dealing with this issue again. So we end up placing it. If it starts limping, we place it.

*By culled, you don't mean putting them down?*

Lenore: Placing them in pet homes.

Mike: What that means might be, you've got a friend and this dog's going to lay on the carpet in front of the fireplace and if it's got a bad elbow, then it's going to be all right in that situation. When we say cull, we're talking about placing it into the right situation.

Lenore: It's just, we're not going to breed anything with that kind of issue.

*You said earlier sometimes you can train it out of a bad temperament.*

Lenore: Some of them, in a kennel situation, are just not good. Once you put them in a pet home where they're the only dog, they can be totally different.

Mike: Some dogs may be kind of insecure as they develop. It's easier to train a little bit

more aggressive dog than it is an insecure or shy dog. If you put that dog with the right person you can build their confidence

and bring them on. It's a matter of knowing the dog and putting them into a good situation for them, and knowing people who

will do that. Sometimes that's just a matter of giving a dog to somebody to get that dog in the right place.

*Even an insecure temperament, you wouldn't consider for breeding?*

Mike: No.

Lenore: We never have. That causes more problems. You're just going to run the risk later down the road of that cropping up again. We've never wanted to deal with that. So, it's gone.

Mike: Everyone has certain things they can't compromise on. That's one of them for us. Also, hips, soundness, and my definition of soundness is not necessarily what a particular x-ray says, but watching a dog move around the kennel every day. If I was buying a two-year-old dog from somebody the question that I would ask would be, "Has he ever limped a day in his life? Has he been sound?" They can get a sticker in their foot and limp, I'm not talking about that, I'm talking about from something else that's going on.

*I'm sure you do OFA.*

Lenore: Yes, it has to have OFA.

Mike: We have never in 25,



Ch. Blackwing Cory.



30 years bred a bitch that didn't pass OFA or bred to a stud dog that didn't pass OFA on hips. Then as elbow came in, we phased that into the program and we've not compromised on that.

Lenore: No matter how good they are.

*OFA is rated, right?*

Mike: Yes.

*What is unacceptable? Just passing or is fair okay?*

Lenore: Fair in a bitch is okay.

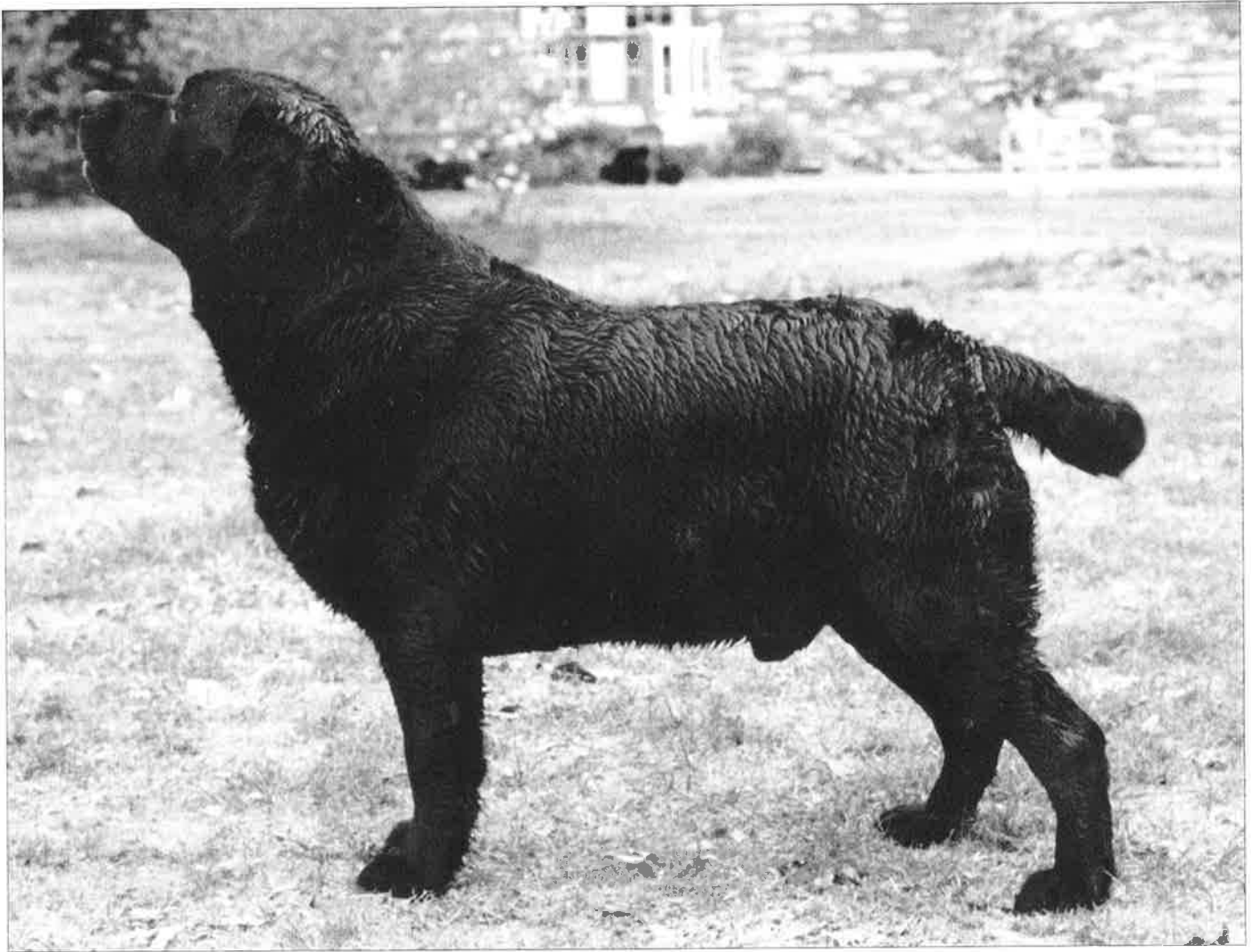
Mike: Now you're splitting hairs a little bit. (laughter) Passing is passing as far as I'm concerned. A great dog with great type and great structure that passes, is good enough for me. You can't absolutely quantify dog breeding. You can't breed by numbers, that's what you're talking about. "I'll only breed a

*Right: Blackwing Mtn*

*Meadow Trump.*

*Below: Ch. Blackwing Super Freak.*





Ch. Blackwing Sherman.

fair to an excellent, and I'll only do this and I'll only do that," I call that breeding by numbers. My point is, can I man up and take responsibility for the fact that I'm using my own judgment, making the best decisions I can with the experience and knowledge I have, take the credit, take the blame? Don't try to put it off on some numerical system that you use to quantify what you do and don't do.

*Do a lot of people breed by numbers?*

Lenore: Yes, newer people probably do. There's some health tests that are proven, like the OFA, but it seems they just keep trying to check for more and more and more. A lot of those tests we're not convinced are accurate yet.

*Which ones don't convince you?*

Lenore: The EIC, some of that. That's not to say that we

won't do it at some point in the future.

*What is EIC?*

Lenore: Exercise induced collapse.

Mike: You know what I think the point of frustration is for a lot of breeders? You've invested a tremendous amount of time and money over a long period of time, you've pretty much put your life into it, and you play by the rules that are in place at the time you get there and then all of a sudden the rules start changing on you. That's good, because I'm all for new research and technology and doing a better job. If we can eliminate anything that's a serious problem, we need to get busy and do it. But we've got to take it as it comes and get the experience with it and know that what we're dealing with is real.

I go back to some issues,

some of the dogs that we bred to twenty years ago, that's got us where we are right now, people were burning crosses in their yards because they thought they were producing PRA or carrying PRA genes. As time passes we've kind of learned that **maybe they were the cleanest dogs that were out there.** So **sometimes what we think** we know is not what the reality of it is. We have to take a slow, logical approach to some of this. You can't throw the baby out with the bathwater, because if you do you may be out there hunting around looking for it a few years from now.

*I'm sure there's an example that you're thinking of. Was it Arnold?*

Mike: Yes. We were new breeders and bred to Arnold, it wasn't just Arnold, it was Graemoor Bombay at the time, who was a Receiver son. It was any-

thing out of Receiver. Here we were, we'd done two breedings, shipped dogs up here to the Northeast and got a lot of investment in this. It was our first big move, and then all of a sudden everybody's running scared over this PRA thing. I did what I'm really glad I did, I picked up the phone and called Kendall and talked to her. She didn't make any excuses, she pretty much told it to me just like what had happened and the way she saw it, and it made me realize, hey, we've got to work through this. It's proved to be a good way to handle it. I feel like that's a good model for any of these health issues, let's don't make long-term decisions on short-term problems and maybe less information than what we like to have.

*Did you have a lot of PRA problems?*

Lenore: Zero.

Mike: Since Optigen has come along, we've had some Optigen B, but to my knowledge we've never produced anything with PRA.

*That's interesting considering who you bred to.*

Mike: See? There you go. Considering the perception of some of those maybe we bred to. But is perception always fact?

*Right. There's a lot of talk, I guess.*

Mike: That's my point. With these new issues that are coming up, there's a lot of talk, and with the advent of the internet, chat, and forums, it's worse than it used to be.

Lenore: They're crucifying a lot of dogs for no reason.

Mike: I'm not going to base my long-term breeding decisions on what I read on chat forums.

*People get caught up in that sort of thing.*

Mike: Let me clarify; I'm not going to knowingly breed two Optigen Bs or two EIC carriers or anything else, I'm not going to knowingly produce something that's a problem. I'll do the best I can with the information I have.

*What do you always test for?*

Lenore: We do Optigen, OFA hips and elbows, and CERF.

Mike: The vet exam of the eyes, and the CERF, we've always done that, we've always done the OFA on hips and we did elbows when it came along and we've done Optigen.

*You don't see jumping on the EIC thing anytime soon?*

Lenore: Not yet.

Mike: From what I know, it's a test, the best-case scenario, if it's a test of one gene site, you've got dominant and recessive, and you can test it and know what that is and know you're not producing it, if that was the case, then I think it would be a logical thing to do at that point in time. But we're just looking at it, analyzing it and even if that is the case, I've got a dog that worst-case scenario is a carrier or even affected, if their bitch is free, then they're not going to produce anything. It's a two-way street, it's not just what the stud dog person is testing for, it's what the bitch has been tested for, too.

You overlay all those health

considerations and they're important, but you overlay that with trying to breed a good quality dog with type and structure and all this other stuff we've talked about, good luck. It's not easy. It's one of those things, like everything else, you have to consider.

*Do you think you've established a distinguishable line?*

Lenore: Some people have said that to us before. I'm reluc-

they can pick out our dogs in the ring.

*What is it? Is it the type, the heads?*

Lenore: I don't know it's any one particular thing.

Mike: Even though we would hate for Kendall Herr to assume any blame for us, we have worked to have dogs like hers. There's a lot of things about Kendall's dogs that Lenore and I both love and

Kendall likes and she would tell you that. That's not bad, that's just the way it is. This thing about a line of dogs, I don't like that much. Everyone builds on the work of other breeders.

Lenore: We don't worry about it. We like what we like.

Mike: We've got a picture in our mind of what we want and that's probably unique to us, but I see it more as an evolution than a line.

*Is there a certain dog attached to the picture in your mind?*

Lenore: It would be Big, that's what I want.

Mike: Blackwing Superfine. Our dog that won Potomac last year is Lenore's favorite dog all-time.

Lenore: I like that profile, that's what I like.

Mike: My favorite dog of all-time, the ideal picture in my mind would be Graemoor Tim.

*You're not the first person to say that.*

Mike: He's a dog that's very well-known with long-term serious breeders, don't get me wrong, but he might not be as well-known as Arnold or some of these other dogs that we've bred to. I was fortunate enough to be at Betty's house and saw him when he was nine or ten weeks old. I remember she got him out of the kennel and I looked at him and she said, "What do you think?" I said, "If I've ever seen a perfect puppy, that's a perfect puppy." Then you see him again when he's older and he wins Potomac and Westminster and these different shows and the fact that he won, that confirms it. He's still, to me, an ideal looking dog.

*As ideal as you can get?*

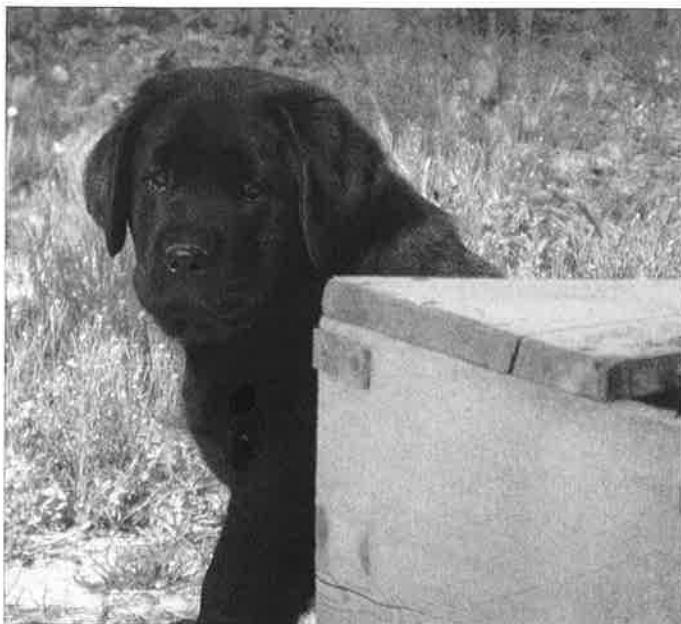
Mike: For me.

Lenore: I agree.

Mike: I'll tell you how much I think about him. For twenty-something years while I worked, underneath the glass on my desk, I didn't have a picture of any dog I ever bred, but I had a picture of Graemoor Tim underneath that glass so I could look at it everyday.

*How would Graemoor Tim differ from Arnold? Are they both similar types of what you like?*

Mike: They're a whole lot more similar than they are different. They were bred very similarly. There's some differences though, when you get into some of the finer points. That's a hard question to answer.



Blackwing pups.

tant to say that myself. I still feel like we're working on getting there. I've had people say

always have and always will. We probably see and like some things different than what



Blackwing Southbound.

*Did you ever breed to Tim?*

Mike: Yes.

*Describe your ideal dog. Talk about the angles, the head, tail, topline, everything you're looking for.*

Lenore: All of that. (laughter) I would say just a really typey dog, good topline, good tailset, short back, good rear angle, good turn of stifle, good front, plenty of bone, substance.

*Do you like substance, not moderate?*

Lenore: I like substance. Everything in proportion.

*There's a lot of shortness of leg right now, so you like everything in proportion?*

Mike: The short leg – are they short-legged or are they long-bodied? That's a six of one, half a dozen of the other. They need to be square. Square is shorter than not square, square is shorter than a rectangle. (laughter)

*Some people say a little off square.*

Lenore: I'd say square.

Mike: We really like and

work towards a really short-backed dog.

Lenore: I still want one that moves well, a good moving dog.

Mike: You've got this thing about how is the dog made, the actual structure. On puppies, I believe what that puppy is is what that dog is going to be. A lot of people want to say it changes, but I think a lot of times you didn't consider everything or you overlooked something when it's a puppy. What it is when it's a puppy, pretty much, I'm talking about the lay-back of the shoulder, the length of the upper arm, how tight is the front, the foot, the turn of the stifle, the shortness of the hock, all that, the level topline, and a lot of things that you get that you like, that length of neck, the things that you look for, it's there in that puppy if you look and can see it.

If you can see it, sometimes you can pick the best puppy out of a terrible litter and it's probably not going to have the kind of

structure that you want. The best puppy out of a great litter that has a lot of great structure, may be exactly what you want. To be a breeder you really have to be a positive individual, we're always trying to look on the bright side of the litter of puppies and we fool ourselves. We have. We've picked out a puppy and thought he had really good structure and when he got older, the more we looked at him, the longer we looked at him, we realized he didn't. Maybe he was a little straight in the rear. Over time we realized that maybe he wasn't what we thought he was even as a puppy.

*A lot of people talk about slow developing lines.*

Mike: For me, slow developing is just fooling yourself into hoping that they'll get all right. (laughter)

Lenore: If it's not there by two, it's not coming.

Mike: Slow developing is not a structure issue. Slow developing is a maturity issue.

There's a difference between maturity and structure. Maturity, a seven-week-old puppy is not as mature as a two-year-old dog. A two-year-old dog is not as mature as a three-year-old dog and I understand that there's some male dogs that when they're nine, ten months old, they look like a mature dog. There's some male dogs that may not be mature until they're three years old. So maturity issues are different than structural issues.

*But from what you're saying, the structure doesn't change.*

Mike: I don't believe it.

*Shouldn't you be seeing the same thing?*

Mike: A lot of it for us over the years has been an experience issue. The ability to look at that puppy ...

Lenore: And pick it out at seven weeks.

*To be continued ...*