

Meet . . .

Owner-Handler

## Susan Davis Shaw

Davisdane

- 1) **Number of years showing dogs.** 38 years, which makes me feel very old.
- 2) **Your kennel name & how you got it.** Davisdane, no explanation needed!
- 3) **Where you live.** Hanover, Massachusetts
- 4) **Where do you travel to show?** Generally, only New England. Occasionally I may travel to NY, NJ, or PA, but not often.
- 5) **How many shows do you attend in a year?** That varies from year to year, but probably 30 or more.
- 6) **Have you ever hired and/or used professional handlers and for what purpose?** Yes, when I started out I knew I had a finishable dog in Davisdane's Double Exposure, but, after putting his first point on him under Don Booxbaum, I realized that I lacked the skill to finish him myself. I hired Judy Harrington and she finished my early dogs and taught me a great deal about the dog show world.
- 7) **What made you decide to owner-handle your Great Danes?** Judy got her judge's license and I didn't know where to turn, so I started showing the dogs myself.
- 8) **What are the greatest advantages of owner-handling your dogs?** There are MANY advantages. Of course the obvious is that you can show where you want and save money on handler costs. But more importantly, you get to work with your dog and become a team. That is providing that you work at your skills and train your dog so that you can work flawlessly together. You can work with your dog a few minutes every day around the house and practice your skills – that is a huge advantage.
- 9) **What are the biggest challenges of owner-handling your dogs?** I spent a lot of years being really nervous and intimidated by the professional handlers. They are recognized by the judges and show with confidence. It took a lot of years for me to realize that my dogs are good, too! Starting off, I was always surprised when I won.
- 10) **What do owner-handlers need to consider if they want to be competitive in the ring?** You need to work at it. Dogs don't train themselves and your skills don't improve unless you know what you are doing wrong and how to improve. You need to learn to present a dog as well as the professionals. If you don't, you usually won't win. Most judges don't look past a poor handling job or a defeatist attitude.
- 11) **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.** I think we all know judges who like a particular handler and that handler will always win no matter what they bring to that judge. So, you write those names down and never bring a dog to them again. There are also judges who only seem to put up professional handlers – again, write their names down and avoid them.
- 12) **Do you feel there is any stigma against owner-handlers in Great Danes and if yes please explain.** No, I don't think so.
- 13) **What tips would you give a new owner-handler to help them step up their game?** First of all, know the standard and be a student of the breed. Then, know your dog and its strengths and weaknesses. Highlight the good and ignore the bad. Work with a mirror at home so you can see what the judge sees. Don't over-handle and bring attention to your dog's faults. I'm willing to bet that a lot of owner-handlers don't know their dog's



best/worst feature. Get to the ring early and watch the judge. Know the ring procedure BEFORE you go in the ring. Have a mentor. Ask questions of the professionals. Most are very approachable and happy to give you advice. Go to a good handling class. Attend every handling seminar that you can. You never stop learning. After 38 years, I still go to handling class every week to hone my skills. When you go in the ring, focus on the dog. Smile – not the fake “junior handler” smile but look like you’re enjoying what you are doing.

- 14) **What is the most valuable advice you ever received about handling your own dogs from a professional handler?** Prepare! Develop confidence. Know your dog’s strengths. Go in with an attitude of: “Look at this - it’s the best you are going to see today!”
- 15) **What is the most helpful technique you ever learned just by watching professional handlers?** When you’re in the ring, never stop handling.
- 16) **What are some common mistakes you see owner-handlers committing in the ring?** Going in expecting to lose or not being prepared. Copying their favorite handler but not knowing why. What works for their dog may not work for yours. Don’t expect the judge to ‘find your dog’ when you have it standing in the ring looking awful. It’s not going to happen.
- 17) **What have been some of your show ring successes as an owner-handler?** Best Puppy at the Futurity has to be at the top of the list as well as the Award of Merit from Westminster. I also had a Group Placement from the Classes and some nice specialty wins and BOB’s from the classes.
- 18) **What are some of the most rewarding things about owner-handling for you?** Knowing that your dog won honestly and not because of who is at the other end of the lead. Also, there is a lot of pride in showing off a dog that you have bred.
- 19) **Most professional handlers began as owner-handlers.** What keeps you from taking that same route? Honestly, I don’t want to be shuffling dogs and scurrying around to try to find people to hold dogs ringside or to cover in winners. That’s just too stressful. I prefer to focus on one dog.
- 20) **Who is your favorite judge and why?** That’s a very difficult question. There are a number of judges that I will always show to because they will give everyone a fair shot, will look at color, and are kind and pleasant in the ring. Bob Layne comes to mind immediately but there are many good judges who will give an owner-handler an equal shot.
- 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?** When anyone asks, we always tell them that yes, we know those characters in Best in Show, but of course none of them are us. I would love Meg Ryan to play me or else Lady Gaga, because of course she loves harlequins.