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At the time, I had no idea that the black and tan dog I was petting would have such a big impact on the rest of my life. I had never seen him before. He seemed friendly as he trotted across the street to greet me on my way home from elementary school. Over the next few months, we developed quite a bond. He would come by my house daily to play. One summer, I went on vacation with my older sister and her family. Curly’s owners decided they didn’t want him anymore and asked my parents if they would take him. My parents knew how much I loved Curly. They also knew how heartbroken I would be if I came home and he was gone. They agreed to take him and that’s how I acquired my first Airedale. That was over 40 years ago.

4-H was offered as an after school program. They had a dog training program and I signed up with Curly. The 4-H dog leader, my third grade teacher, suggested I enter the obedience classes offered at the local fairgrounds. They were sponsored by the Kalamazoo Kennel Club. Members of the Kalamazoo Kennel Club encouraged me to continue taking obedience training classes, enter dog shows, learn how to strip an Airedale’s coat, and steward at shows and trials. They not only encouraged me to join the club, but included me in club activities that helped me become an active member of the club at the age of 16. I am still very active in the club, serving as a board member and treasurer.

I have owned several Airedales over the years. I never put any titles on Curly, but my second Airedale, Airhem Commander in Chief, earned his CD in 1967 and his CDX in 1968. I attempted Utility training with him, but wasn’t very successful teaching him the Utility exercises from a book.

Two years after finishing Chief’s CDX, I entered college. After I graduated, I found a job at a local bank and have spent the last 31 years in the banking business. I work full time as a Banking Center Manager in Portage, Michigan. I reside in Kalamazoo, MI with my husband of 27 years, Gary and our two sons. They have been very supportive of my commitment to dog training. We have two Airedales: one is a two-year-old male, Ch. Caleb Acres Hunt For Airhem (Hunter) and the other is Ch. OTCH Caleb Acres Airhem Spice, UDX2. Both dogs were bred by Judy Brown of Syracuse, NY. Spice recently made Airheim history by becoming the first Airedale to ever earn the OTCH title.

Completing Spice’s OTCH is really what this article is about. From the first time I saw Spice sitting at the fence as a puppy, I knew she had the ability to earn an OTCH. It was my abilities as a trainer that I worried about. Was I capable of training a dog to an OTCH? Luckily, I had very good training friends that guided me throughout our journey.

In the fall of 1999, I began to look for my next obedience prospect. The Airedale Terrier Club of America held a Floating Specialty in Columbus, Ohio. They were holding an obedience trial and agility trial for Airedales at the same show site. It would be a good chance for me to see Airedales in action, look at structure and see if any caught my eye.

Columbus is the site where I met Judy Brown. I observed her two Airedales work in obedience and agility. They both worked very well. What struck me most was the fluid jumping style her dogs possessed. They also appeared to be very agile on the courses. After I inquired about future litters, I found out that she was going to breed her bitch, Chloe, in the early spring. At the time, she would not tell me who she was considering for the sire.
As it turned out, Judy ended up breeding her bitch to the male she had at the trials. Now, I was really excited about this litter! I was looking for a very special puppy, one to fulfill a dream I had. I was sure this litter would produce what I was looking for. I sent in a deposit on a puppy, but I was prepared to walk away from the litter if I didn’t see what I wanted. The litter was whelped on April 19, 2000, four boys and four girls. Gary and I made plans to drive to Watertown, NY to look at the litter when they were about six weeks old.

I began thinking about all my other Airedales. What had made some of them better working dogs than others? What did I need in a pup to make it a dog that could compete in the obedience ring? I searched the web and read books on puppy testing. I decided that I would look for a puppy that wanted to be with me, not its littermates. This new puppy needed to be outgoing, possess good food and toy drive, and be able to take a correction. I hoped for a natural retriever, even though I believe in force breaking the retrieve. I also wanted to look for a pup that had something that resembled an attention span.

When we arrived at Judy’s, and the puppies were let out in the pen, there was one that pushed her way to the front of the fence and stared intently at me. If I moved, she was the first one to get to me. She was very hard to ignore, but I wanted to keep an open mind until I had time to look at all of the pups. When I went inside the enclosure, I was greeted by all eight puppies. Soon a few went off to play with their litter mates, but four remained close by me. It was very hard to choose, but I narrowed it down to three, two girls and one boy. I took out my car keys and tossed them a short distance, all three ran to the keys, but the pup that had followed me at the fence, picked up the keys and brought them back to me. That really was the tie breaker.

Three weeks later, we drove back to NY to pick up our new puppy. We had decided to name her Spice. Training started as soon as we got her accustomed to our home and family. She was a very active puppy, quick and agile. I was training with Adele Yunck at the time we picked up Spice. She started us on puppy maneuvers for heeling. I also started training with some local trainers that were very successful with their dogs in obedience. I shared with them my dream of competing in obedience with an Airedale and possibly achieving the OTCH title on Spice. None of them discouraged me and all were very willing to help me achieve my dream. Little did I know how much I would learn, how hard I would have to work, and how much my training abilities would evolve on our journey to an OTCH.

I enrolled Spice in classes held by the Kalamazoo Dog Training Club. My friends Elly Burke, Marcia Johnson and Brenda Zielinski taught classes there. Their eye for detail and precision proved to be invaluable. They had answers for problems that I had not even recognized. They encouraged me to attend Sandra Ladwig’s four day training camp with them in the spring of 2001. I admit to having mixed emotions the first day of camp, but that night I made a list of what I liked and what I disliked. The “like” list was much longer, and by the end of the four days, I was hooked on Sandy and her training. To this day, I still attend both her camps if my schedule allows. I am never bored as Sandy always has some new training idea to show us.

Spice matured into a very nice looking Airedale. I felt she could earn a Championship and discussed this with Judy, Judy wrote a letter to AKC to have Spice’s limited registration changed to allow me to show her in Conformation. I put three points on her and then had Mary Beecher Padgett and her husband Craig handle Spice for the rest of her points. She finished her Championship in December 2002. I continued training Spice when she was home with me. She completed her CD in September 2002 with a HIT. Something I had never achieved before. She was also HIT at the Airedale Terrier Club of America Obedience Trial in October 2002. I was thrilled!

My feet were brought back firmly to the ground when someone said that anyone could train a good Novice dog. It was the great Open and Utility dogs that were remembered! I was now determined to make Spice a great Open and Utility dog!

We perfected our Open work over the winter and Spice earned her CDX in March of 2003. We continued to show in the Open B classes the rest of the year while working on the Utility exercises. Spice proved to be very consistent qualifying 14 times out of 17 shows and with scores ranging from 194 to 197.5. I brought Spice out in Utility at our local trials, the end of March 2004. She earned her first UD leg that weekend and was NQ’d several shows. I moved her to the Utility B class and wore her out!
finished her UD title Memorial weekend, placing second in an Open B class of 17.

In June, we attended two trials in Traverse City, MI. I was hoping for good runs, but mainly looking for UDX legs. Imagine my surprise when we placed in all four classes that weekend! We came home with 12 OTCH points, a Utility B first, our first High Combined award and I was fairly sure we had qualified for the AKC National Obedience Invitational.

Wow, that was easy! (It didn't take long for me to eat those unspoken words!) Maybe I really could put an OTCH on Spice.

I started showing Spice regularly on our quest for an OTCH. My goal was to show two weekends a month. She NQ'd several shows in Utility. Then she would pull it all together and have a great weekend of shows and earn more OTCH points, only to have a different exercise break down the next time we showed. She was definitely going to teach me more about dog training!

We qualified enough times to finish our UDX in November of 2004 and end the year with 35 OTCH points. I found it hard to stay focused in training right after our UDX was completed. It was dark when I got home from work and we usually trained outdoors. Winter was coming and my show schedule slows down until March. Classes were done until January, so there was no motivation from that source. I also needed to start training for the invitational. The holidays were upon us and there was pressure at work. I needed to get my mind set fixed... soon!

We were not the only Airedale team hoping to earn an OTCH. Alice Peterson from Boise, Idaho and Tigger, (Kudo's I'm the Only One, UDX) were racking up points too. They also qualified for the NOI and planned to attend.

The NOI was a wonderful experience. I really enjoyed the atmosphere of Saturday's competition. Everyone was excited, enthused and friendly. All three Airedales that qualified for the NOI competed. Alice and Tigger were in the ring just before us all day on Saturday. What a great team they are! Spice was not as focused as she could have been, but she did qualify in all rings on Saturday and advanced to Sunday's competition, as did Alice and Tigger. Spice and I placed third in the Terrier group, Alice and Tigger were only a half point behind us and placed fourth.

I realized Saturday evening, that I had mentally prepared myself for Saturday, hoping to make it into Sunday's competition. However, I had not given much thought to the head to head competition on Sunday. It was a totally different atmosphere. Very serious... you could hear a pin drop in the ring area. Spice had a respectable performance, qualifying on all her exercises in the first round; however, it was not good enough to score higher than Kathy Rasinovich and Wrigley, OTCH First String's Cubby Bear, UDX22. I was quite relieved to be out in the first round and watch the rest of the competition. Since Kathy and Wrigley had defeated us, I had to cheer them on as they progressed during the day, finally winning the coveted NOC title.

We resumed showing in March with less than stellar performances. Spice was making silly mistakes that were costing us substantial points. I was frustrated. I could sense that she was not comfortable in the ring... especially Utility. Stepping back and looking at our training, I saw several problems. Spice lacked confidence in Utility. Her lack of focus and work ethic needed to be addressed. Her mistakes were affecting my confidence, making me less of a leader in the ring. We were not working like the team I knew we could be. This was affecting the way I was training Spice and our relationship.

I longed for some form of consistency in our showing. Spice had been very consistent in Open, but now even that was starting to be affected. What had changed when Utility entered the picture? What was I doing differently last year in training and show preparation? I picked a lot of OTCH trainers' brains at shows. I'm sure they thought twice about crating near me, but they were all very helpful and encouraging!

I decided I needed to look at our relationship first. Spice and I started doing things together without Hunter along. Then I looked at my training. At home, I made sure that I followed through and required her to do what I had asked. Elly and Brenda pointed out that I had relaxed my expectations. I had let gray areas creep into my training when I should have been clearer and made it black and white. Spice was not making the same mistakes in training, so I started making my training more difficult.

I began to see glimpses of the "old" Spice when we showed. We placed at our local trials in April and came home with 18
more points putting us at 53. In May, we placed third in a very large Open B class for five OTCH points. The next weekend, we had one of our better Utility runs. Instead of feeling like I was dragging a ten pound bowling ball around the ring with me, Spice was as light as a feather. She had a great time in the ring and looked very confident. I felt good about our run, but the competition was tough. I was thrilled when our number was called for first place and ten more OTCH points. I finally felt like the changes I had made were working.

We did well at some other shows, but there were no points for the placements even though our scores were 198. In August, we picked up 11 more points. We were up to 79 points now. September saw us NQ again in Utility. Not only had I let my criteria slip again, but I was starting to feel the pressure of knowing that we had enough points that we could finish this title at any upcoming show. Spice wasn’t the only one with a focus problem now!

We were entered at the Airedale National Specialty near Philadelphia the second weekend in October. I decided to begin the trip early and entered two trials near Pittsburgh, the weekend before our specialty. These were very nice trials hosted by the Westmoreland Co. OTC. We had a great weekend. On Saturday, Spice won the OB class, placed fourth in UB and was HIT with a 198.5. Sunday, Spice had another very nice Open B run but was out of the ribbons with a 198. Her Utility B run was lovely, one of her best, except for a missed down signal. It had been a great weekend, making new friends and reconnecting with some I hadn’t seen in awhile.

We left Pittsburgh Monday morning with 85 OTCH points and headed east to Lionville, PA. I joined Judy Brown at the all terrier agility trials, watched her run Chloe and Spice’s sister, Charisma and worked the trials one day. Judy and I trained Tuesday and Wednesday evening; the sessions did not go well. Spice could not do a straight go out to a stanchion to save her soul!

On Thursday, the Soft Coated Wheaton Terrier Club of America hosted an obedience trial open to all terrier breeds. It was a well organized event with plenty of room for crates and three large rings. This was the largest obedience trial for terriers that I had ever attended. 118 terriers were entered with 135 entries!

I was very nervous on Thursday. I knew that we could achieve our dream that day if we qualified and did well enough to place. We had to win the Utility B class and place in Open B to finish. Nancy Withers judged Utility B. I remember talking to Spice, between exercises. As we set up for signals, I told her, “We really need to do these signals today.” Her heeling was nice and she did all her signals. The moving stand was no problem ... we had qualified! When the class qualifiers were called into the ring, Spice and I were first with a 195.5. That win gave us 14 more OTCH points ... putting us at 99! Ruth Brader judged Open B. Our run was very nice. I reminded Spice about her job to sit before we went in for the stays. I did not want to drive all the way back to Kalamazoo with 99 points because she broke her long sit! She held both positions and we qualified, but we still had to place third or better to finish our OTCH.

While I was waiting for the class to finish, some of the agility Airedale exhibitors came up to congratulate me on our OTCH. Talk about the kiss of death! I calmly told them we had qualified but needed the class to finish and see if we placed before we could claim the title.

Ruth Brader had no idea that we were so close to finishing our OTCH and making breed history. I had mentioned to Nancy Withers that our placement in her class put us at 99 points. When the Open B qualifiers were called back into the ring, Nancy stopped judging the Utility A, class until placements were done. When the class was placed, Spice and I won the class with a 198.5 and 14 more OTCH points, taking us to 113 points. The crowd erupted with cheers and well wishes. In addition to our OTCH, Spice was also HIT and HC.

It was a day I will never forget. You always think you will be surrounded by your close training friends when you finish such a special title. I hadn’t thought much about it, but having Spice finish her OTCH at one of the events that coincide with the famous Montgomery County Kennel Club terrier show was truly special. To share this with so many Airedale lovers and to have Spice’s breeder there was icing on the cake.

Someone asked me, “What do you do after you have an OTCH?” In our case, we will continue to show at trials that I enjoy attending. Our show schedule will not be as hectic as it has been the past 16 months. We plan to attend the NOI in January. Hunter’s training has taken a back seat to Spice’s training schedule. He is such a neat dog. It’s time he got a chance to follow in her footsteps and teach me more about dog training.

I am forever grateful to Judy Brown for breeding Spice. Judy knew my goal was an OTCH when I picked Spice out and she never doubted that we would achieve it. My family has been great: Thank you, Gary, Travis and Kurt, for being so understanding about my training and show schedule. I know you had no idea about what I wanted to accomplish, yet you supported me in my endeavor. The friendships I have made while training and competing with Spice are pure gold. I am deeply indebted to Elly Burke, Brenda Zielinski and Barbara Clark for all their help and support throughout this journey. The knowledge and experience that you willingly shared with me was key to our success. You encouraged me to work harder when I was frustrated, and helped me keep my feet on the ground during the high times. We couldn’t have done it without you!

Promote Obedience... Smile at your next show!