

Breeder Interview

BY ALLAN REZNIK

ERICA & RACHEL VENIER, ORCHARD HILL CAVALIERS



Where did you grow up? Do you come from a doggy family? And if not, how did the interest in breeding and showing purebred dogs begin?

EV: I grew up in Philadelphia. My parents were working artists and taught me to view things critically and with a sharp eye. Their artistic sensibility was a strong influence on me.

As a child, my mother introduced me to the world of purebred dogs through a well-worn copy of *The New Book of the Dog* (published 1908). Long before I could read, I spent hours admiring the many photos and paintings which illustrated the book, determined to have a houseful of purebred dogs of my own someday.

RV: I was born into the dog show world. Through the 1970s and '80s, Mom bred and showed Shetland Sheepdogs under the Wits' End prefix. Even as a toddler, I gravitated toward the dogs. I remember "picking" my first litter as a four year old. (Incidentally, I picked right, though I strongly suspect Mom steered me in the right direction.) Growing up, my mom taught me the fundamentals of type, structure and movement. Watching the Shelties play in a field, my mom would candidly evaluate each dog for me. If two dogs were shown in a certain area, she showed me which was a tick better.

She even evaluated our cats' conformation. Even if I was too young to fully absorb the lessons when they began, they lasted through my childhood but came back to dogs in my last year of college.

Who were your mentors in the sport? Please elaborate on their influence.

EV: As an introspective, self-critical yet independent person, I have learned by listening to successful breeders around the world while working quietly on my craft. We have gravitated toward artistic people who are also pragmatic and honest, people with an eye for art combined with high moral principles and a straightforward, outspoken style. Early on, I learned lessons from Tom Coen that I carry with me today. We have both benefited enormously from our association with Peter Green, Beth Sweigart, Ernesto Lara and Carlos De La Torre as well. Talented people who are willing to share their knowledge create an atmosphere in which we can all continue to grow and learn.

The Orchard Hill Cavaliers are widely known, highly successful and well respected. What breeding philosophies do you adhere to?

Thank you so much for such generous words.

RV: As a breeder, it is imperative to have a vision in your mind's eye of the look you are trying to achieve. Without an artistic vision, you may lack direction in a breeding program. We are trying to produce a structurally sound dog of quintessential Cavalier type: melting expression, correct breed outline (slightly longer than tall, equal distance shoulder to elbow, elbow to ground), and affectionate, sporting breed character.

Breeding with that vision always in mind, we often do type-to-type breedings. When planning every breeding, we assess the bitch against our vision of the ideal Cavalier and goals for our breeding



Left to Right:

Rachel Venier with Ch. Orchard Hill Gotta Adore Me, Award of Merit; Erica Venier with GCh. Orchard Hill Ephemeral, Best of Opposite Sex; Ch. Orchard Hill News To Me, Award of Merit (litter sibling to Gotta Adore Me; Robert Schroll has an amazing eye for type); Julia Johns with GCh. Orchard Hill Inclusive.



USA/AKC Ch. Orchard Hill Never Grow Up, ROM, LOM "Wendy" Group winner, multiple Specialty winner; Wendy produced well for us with nine AKC Champions, eight of which were also CKCSC-USA Champions. She is another bitch to which we owe a debt of gratitude. Her head study has been used by the AKC and the ACKCSC to illustrate a correct tricolor Cavalier. Best of Breed, CKCSC of Southern California, 2006.

program to achieve the vision. We first consider health and temperament, always. Then we critique our bitch carefully; she needs to be more than a good Cavalier; she needs to have something to contribute to the breeding program. We usually choose two things we want to improve in the bitch and two things we want to keep, knowing that we might not achieve all of those goals. Essentially, we identify one thing to improve and a "contingency plan" in case we miss the mark on our first goal. Thinking this way gives us a focused but pragmatic approach. Having considered what we want to keep and what we want to improve in the bitch, we look for a male that not only has those virtues but has also produced them consistently when bred to our bitch's family. We do not always find a proven producer who also matches our bitch in type, but we always try.

EV: Several years ago a friend who breeds and judges both Toys and Terriers was asked what one thing she wished she could change about her then top winner, a multiple Best in Show bitch. Her immediate response: "If I could change one thing about her, I wish I were her breeder." I loved that honest answer, straight from the heart of a real breeder. That is exactly how Rachel and I feel, always. We want to be able to create the best dog possible. If we cannot own it or show it ourselves, that's fine with us. But we want to have bred it, to be able to see the years of thought and effort and expectations come to fruition in a living creature. In the end, for us, it's not all about winning. It's about the pride of having been able to sort through a thousand choices and come up with the right combination; a dog which is sound, healthy, typey and respected by our peers. What an honor.

How many dogs do you typically house? Tell us about your facilities and how the dogs are maintained.

EV: We try to keep our group to a manageable number of around 15 adults and five



Left to Right: Patty Kanan; FCI Judge Jan Tornblom (Sweden); handler Roxanne Sutton; Norman Patton.

or six youngsters which we are running on at any given time. The advantage is that our dogs are closely watched and well understood, mentally and physically. The disadvantage is that we are often forced to place credible dogs as pets if a proper show home is not available.

Our dogs are kept in our home: dogs and bitches are together in one large, well-appointed room right off the kitchen. Bitches in season, puppies, and mothers with young babies are kept on the other side of the house.

Puppies are whelped in a downstairs bedroom. In good weather puppies have access to a large, safe flagstone play yard most of their waking hours. A covered pergola protects them against sun or light rain. At feeding time or when the puppies begin to tire we bring them inside. As soon as they wake up they are escorted outside again. Although this process is labor intensive, it encourages puppies to become crate trained and house trained quickly. Our puppies are raised much like one would raise their pet puppy; every puppy is handled daily and exposed to multiple sights and sounds and experiences in order to help develop sound social skills.

We have several acres of large, fenced paddocks. Dogs are turned out on a generous schedule which allows them to exercise themselves. Safe climbing apparatus are available in every paddock. We firmly believe this way of housing multiple dogs helps develop their minds, a crucial aspect of future success in the show ring.

We rotate the use of the paddocks so that every dog benefits from an extended turn-out in one of the larger, stepped paddocks daily, weather permitting. Racing up and down stepped paddocks and through deep gravel helps the dogs condition themselves not only physically but also mentally. Snow days or rainy days are a lesson in organized chaos, as our covered areas are smaller and the dogs must take turns throughout the day. Even so, everyone gets an extended outdoor play period at least once a day regardless of the weather. We take pride in presenting dogs which are not only properly groomed but also well muscled and fit.

Who were/are some of your most significant Cavaliers, both in the whelping box and in the show ring?

RV: Producing a dog that is recognized by our peers either in the breed ring or as a producer is the soul of the sport. It is deeply gratifying to realize that our 2019



USA/AKC Ch. Orchard Hill Easier Said "Elise" Best of Breed ACKCSC National Specialty 2008 Breeder-Judge Annette Jones, Timsar, UK



Left to Right: breeder-judge Wendy L'Hote (France), Erica Venier and daughter, Rachel Venier.

National Specialty winner, GCh. Orchard Hill Inclusive, comes down directly on his dam's side six generations from our foundation bitch. Our foundation bitch, Ch. Bramble Royal Heritage of Orchard Hill, ROM, LOM produced three daughters who are behind everything we have today. Her daughters, litter sisters CKC-SCUSA/AKC Ch. Orchard Hill Party Shoes, ROM, LOM; CKCSCUSA/AKC Ch. Orchard Hill Where's The Party?; and Ch. Orchard Hill Surprise Party, ROM, LOM are behind a string of specialty and all-breed winners including three National Specialty Best of Breed winners and all-breed Best in Show winners. Linebreeding on the "Party Girls" is the basis of our breeding program.

Please comment positively on your breed's present condition and what trends might bear watching.

EV: In some ways Cavaliers have improved greatly over the last 25 years. Breeders with an eye on the Toy Group and beyond have been making a concert-

ed effort to select for structure as well as head qualities.

A concern for breeders to bear in mind is temperament. Occasionally a timid or aggressive animal finds his way into the ring. The hallmark of a Cavalier is his joyful temperament. His ears are up, his tail is in motion when on the move, and his body language "smiles." Breeders and judges do the breed a disservice when we reward poor temperament. But as long as breeders are honest with themselves and eliminate sharp or shy temperaments from their breeding programs, this potential problem can be kept in check.

RV: Breed type has improved in the United States. Our breed was essentially recreated in the early 20th century from King Charles Spaniels (known as English Toy Spaniels in the USA) resembling those in old paintings such as Edwin Landseer's "The Cavalier's Pets." We are therefore a relatively young breed tracing back to dogs with a wide divergence in type, shape and structure. It is a tremendous challenge to set type in our breed. You may still see different

"looks" in your typical US Cavalier entry, but there are more and more dogs with good breed type.

The sport has changed greatly since you first began participating. What are your thoughts on the state of the fancy and the declining number of breeders? How do we encourage newcomers to join us and remain in the sport?

EV: None of us individually can have much effect on the cultural and social changes of our times, but within our community we can be kind. We can be willing to listen. We can be willing to help. And we can be open minded toward change.

RV: This is a big topic, but in a few words, the sport needs to be inclusive. The world is full of dog lovers. We need to welcome them. My mom and I take the time to mentor. We share good dogs judiciously. We try to support talented juniors and young handlers. All of us—judges, breeders, exhibitors—need to support young enthusiasts if we want them to stay in the sport.

Where do you see your breeding program in the next decade or two?

EV: My hope is to continue to produce dogs which are a credit to the breed.

RV: Every dog we show traces back to one bitch. We can't tell you how hard it is to keep a bitch line going while maintaining quality. Everything has to come together for a dog to stay in the breeding program: health, type, structure, temperament. Then the dog has to be able to reproduce its qualities. You need to be steady and secure in your vision but have the agility to pivot when things don't work out. I don't think it gets easier over time. Our goal is to keep producing a family of healthy, happy dogs that compete at the sport's highest levels.

Finally, tell us a little about Erica and Rachel outside of dogs... your professions, your hobbies.

EV: I have always been interested in art and attended the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts as well as earning a degree in Elementary Education from Alvernia University. I consider our dogs to be an expression of those interests.

RV: Professionally, I work as an employment lawyer in Washington, D.C., primarily in discrimination and retaliation law. My legal background informs how I study breed standards and how I organize my thoughts.

Nurturing and working with animals has been a lifelong passion. Growing up with herding dogs and show hunters gave me a foundation for studying structure and function. I learn something from every animal I work with. Sometimes I think I learn more and know less every year! That's the reality of spending a lifetime with animals. ■