

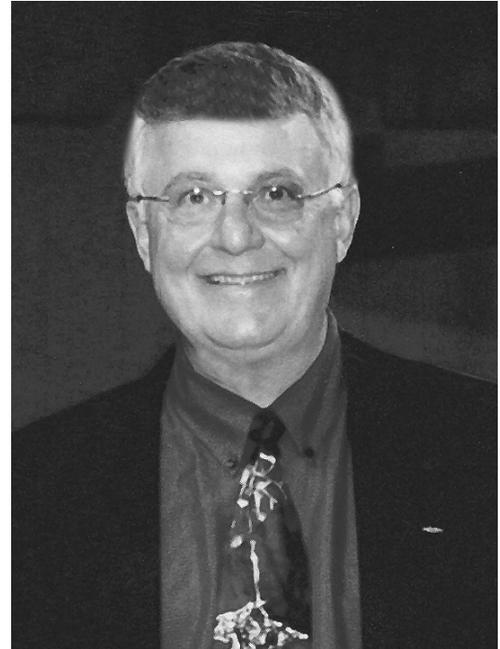
## INTERVIEW WITH BOB PICCIRILLO

Rapporlee Shetland Sheepdogs

Bob Piccirillo of *Rapporlee Shetland Sheepdogs* is a breeder/judge with over 45 years experience in the breed. He and his wife, Vicki, also a judge, currently reside in the metro St. Louis area.

### **What dogs were the foundation for your breeding program and why did you select them? Who were your mentors?**

It was a long, long time ago, growing up in Connecticut that I got my first sheltie, a sable & white bitch from *Page's Hill* – very much 'Sea Isle' in type, as well as pedigree. "Lassie" was a Sunday night staple on TV then, and I think every kid in America wanted a Collie? My father was savvy enough to realize that the size of our yard would not be the best for keeping a dog potentially that large and active, so a 'mini collie' from Nate Levine it was! The breed was not as well known then and I recall with amusement, that as kids, we tried to keep it a 'secret' amongst ourselves as to just what breed she was, as if guarding something 'very special and magical' all to ourselves!



I remember vividly the hours of play together, watching her long, tireless runs and being amazed at the athleticism, dexterity, intelligence, beauty, and devotion to our family by this amazing little dog. Those traits, and qualities became etched in my mind as to what a true sheltie should possess, and were the 'vision', if you will, that has guided our breeding programs to date.

Our current line of dogs traces back to a young bitch that we bought from Joan McCord of *Klassic Shelties* soon after moving to St. Louis from the east coast – '*Klassic Summer Breeze*'. "Rachael" was by *CH. Tull E Ho Flash Fire* out of *CH. Alynphyll Coquette*, and perhaps one of the best overall movers we have owned; her drive, reach, and side movement were extraordinary and was the deciding factor in getting her; she ended up being the dam of three champions. Starting out with 'brown dogs', in this portion of the Midwest was difficult – there weren't then, and still aren't the number of sable breeders, within a 'reasonable driving distance,' that there are in other parts of the country.



*Klassic Summer Breeze*

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Trips 'back home' to visit my parents usually ended up in some fashion at the homes of Barbara & Bob Kenealy, Kay & Herb Searle, or Millie Nichol to gather their advices. I was lucky that they took me under their wing, and so my mentors ended up being literally 'down the road' from where I grew up, but a long way from where I was living. The close friendships that developed through the years are by far the best rewards this sport has blessed us with.

**Which dogs had the most influence on your breeding program? Is there a special dog for you among the many you have owned over the years?**



*CH. Rockwoods Gold Strike, ROM, 2CC* still 'lives on' in our kennel to this day. A "Chance" son (*CH. Rorralore Sportin' Chance, ROM*) out of a "Peter" daughter (*CH. Rockwood Sweet Charity*), "Striker" epitomized in my mind's eye what the breed should be. He was phenotypically what we liked, envisioned, and as a 'bonus' a direct product of Barbara Kenealy's tremendous bitch line. We ended up having three of his Champion get here as well, all of whom have played a large part in our program; *Am/Can CH. Sherwyn Traces of Gold-"Mickey"*, *CH. Rapporlee Gold Touch-"Sharman"*, and *Am/Can CH. Candega Sure Gold-"Cody"*. We are pleased to see that these dogs are still behind some quality descendants being exhibited here in the States, as well as in Canada today; our current special, "Tanner"-*CH. Spellbound Shooting Star*, is too.



Top left: *Am/Can CH. Candega Sure Gold "Cody"*.  
Above: *CH. Rapporlee Gold Touch-"Sharman"*  
Right: *Am/Can CH. Sherwyn Traces of Gold-"Mickey"*

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Above: "Tanner"- CH. Spellbound Shooting Star

Below: CH. Rapporlee All-Riled Up. "Riley"



I think that every breeder has had a dog that ends up having a closer bond with them than any of the others, even though you love them all. For me it was CH. Rapporlee All-Riled Up. "Riley" inherited that 'regal aloofness' and bearing that brought a smile to my face every time I watched him run across the yard. His expression and eye though were some of his greatest virtues and he would melt the hearts of even the most cynical who believed the girls are the 'pretty ones'! "Riley" was always very tolerant and friendly towards others, but he was quick to let everyone know that he was 'my dog' – he was usually never more than half a dozen steps from my side.

His presence here was responsible for us in steering our program in a slightly different direction; with his 'Benayr influence' we started to add dogs with those lines to ours as well. Although he lived until he was sixteen, his passing left a huge void in our household.

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### **How tightly are you willing to linebreed, how do you choose an outcross?**

Early on during our formative years, we studied everything written, and queried all who could give us a better understanding of successful animal husbandry. Our mentors, and other top breeders country-wide, were adamant in their guidance and approach to ‘success’; as a result we ‘heard’ succinctly that linebreeding was the best way to achieve the *consistency of type* that is needed in our breed, or any breed for that matter. We learned additionally in the process that it is the quickest way for most newcomers to achieve their goals in breeding – albeit, *you do have to have good dogs to start with!* As the old saying goes, “you can’t turn a sow’s ear into a silk purse!” We’ve observed, far too many times, that this factor is the single biggest mistake most newcomers make in trying to start out on a ‘budget’!

We are willing to selectively inbreed when the right individuals and their virtues present themselves; over the years though through ‘luck of the draw’ we have had limited opportunities to do so. Most of the linebreeding we do is typically half-brother to half-sister, uncle to niece, etc., and that is a fairly routine practice here.

When we have chosen to do an outcross it is generally to dogs that are pheno-typically similar to ours, yet whose qualities and of those in his pedigree we believe can still bring to the table virtues missing in ours. Understand that in this process it is extremely important to know the virtues/faults of the grandparents as well.

### **What are the priorities for you personally in your breeding program?**

As posted on the ASSA website, the *Judges Education Program (5/2008)* supports a concise direction, in my opinion....

“More than any other feature, head and expression sets the Sheltie apart from any other breed – even the Collie. *No matter how well built a Sheltie is, if it has a poor head, it lacks an essential type characteristic, and cannot be a good specimen of the breed.*”

Nate Levine, in his essays written for the Handbook, said: “You must make the choice ... whether to base the selection of stud dogs on lack of faults and settle for mediocrity ... or select on the basis of positive virtues with a chance to get that great one! *And what is that great one? Certainly not the Sheltie perfect from behind the ears to the tip of his tail!*”

In a nutshell, I do not want my dogs looking like Aussies, nor like Border Collies – *I want dogs with nice heads and expression – “pretty dogs” – that portray the ‘essence’ of the breed and evoke emotion each time you look at them!* I do want dogs with sufficient bone and substance, but they also need to have the *refinement, the athleticism, and carriage* that befits their heritage – not a squat and bulky look that makes them appear like they are juiced on steroids. That demands breeding too for an adequate amount of leg underneath the dog and the *balance* that the standard requires. Please read into that also that *they must be able to move*, and have the functioning parts to allow it!

Since all our dogs are raised, and live in our home, temperament is right up there at the top too; dogs that I can’t ‘live with’ or that aren’t good ‘pack members’ usually won’t stay here long neither.

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### **What responsibilities go along with standing a dog at stud? Do you offer chilled semen shipping?**

Do your tests beforehand, and require that prospective bitches do the same. After that the single biggest responsibility a stud dog owner has is being honest. Realize that your dog, no matter how nice he is, does have faults and may not go with every bitch that you get an inquiry on; let their owners know. Treat all visiting girls as if they were your own; *splitting semen* ‘three ways’ or breeding a dog *back to back to back days continuously*, does no one any good.

We like to think that we were a ‘pioneer within the breed’ in utilizing chilled semen, and have told everyone who will listen that it is probably one of the best things ‘since sliced bread!’ Nowadays with the costs of shipping by air ‘out of the ballpark,’ most of our breedings are being done by chilled semen – and our success ration is still over 90%! I would like to see AKC drop the requirement for the physical insemination to be veterinarian certified; with DNA testing for popular sires, etc., the chance for falsifying a breeding are almost nil. A ‘requirement’ for the bitch to be DNA tested too would certainly still be far less than current vet visits, and could make the AKC additional bucks too?

### **Do newcomers to the breed utilize the ASSA mentoring program?**

*Not near as many as should. The vast changes in technology have created an ‘education system’ for ‘newbies’ that makes that avenue seem slow and cumbersome, and to some, even obsolete? The regional clubs have suffered a decline in membership for most likely the same reason too – new enthusiasts can “google” whatever information they require without the efforts of having to embrace a mentor, or a club to secure the right direction or answer. That information in the past was only obtainable by ‘talking’ and picking the brains of knowledgeable and seasoned breeders. So, what do we have now? It seems, ‘instant experts’ and, no humility, no self-examination of direction, or work ever required!*

Newcomers utilizing the web seem to relish that instant gratification instead of a chance of creating personal relationships; obviously a big problem being that many never discern between the half-truths presented online, the possibilities of differing opinions, theories, and science, and just what won’t, or hasn’t worked in the past! What they lose are the opportunities to pick the brains of veteran breeders who have walked that road before and maybe, just maybe, through that relationship, the chance to get that special dog or bitch that may have been elusive otherwise? Many of this newer generation of ‘breeder’ never gets to put their hands on truly sound dogs either, but seem satisfied with a ‘Photoshop Interpretation’ they have gathered instead; just like many of our all-rounder judges, they really never get to know what true qualities of the breed really are! The ultimate shame is that much of the current generation’s knowledge and working experience within the breed will soon be lost forever.

### **What advice do you have for newcomers regarding setting achievable goals and planning a breeding program?**

#### **NOT the approach to take:**

Build a website, and then advertise/sell your current pet’s litter as being all ‘show quality puppies’ – even though you’ve never finished a champion yourself. Take the money and buy a dog from an on-

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line site and breed it back to your 'pet bitch' in hopes that you might get a girl to show & breed up to in the process.

It always appears that newcomers to shelties often have everything but patience, and the right advices – the result is often discouragement and a quick exit from the breed. In starting a breeding program the right way you most certainly *need the best bitch available!* Rather than scouring the internet to buy a girl, any girl, any pedigree – a different tact might be in order...?

I try to suggest to those that ask, that perhaps a quality male would be a better approach in them gaining experience, credibility, and an eye for a good dog first? There always seems to be a greater number of nice boys that established breeders are willing to part with; by purchasing, and then showing a male, newcomers can jump into the sport right off the bat. They'll then be in a position to not only learn the ropes, but to demonstrate to other enthusiasts their willingness and demeanor to 'do what it takes!'

Once you've been 'around the block a time or two' it just might accomplish a few things for you:

- 1) You actually get to observe 'types of shelties' from many different breeders and areas of the country, and can finally decide on those that you envision come closest to being your 'picture of the standard.' This simple process is a *primary step and invaluable in setting goals that you can obtain*; very few, unfortunately, take the time. (After "collecting" a household full of pets, some others finally get the drift too – but with a much more costly scenario.)
- 2) Now you should have a better 'in person perspective' as to breeders whom you might approach for a nice bitch/puppy hopeful that approaches your ideal. Since you've created a history of showing your boy, and learning along the way, those breeders are more likely to have a better idea of who you are too? When you've reached this stage, now is the time to 'go for it!'
- 3) Once you have been able to secure a nice bitch, plan on breeding to the best dogs *available* (perhaps ones you've seen in the ring or at the National?), and NOT necessarily your own dog – even though you may have finished it. The breeder of the bitch will be invaluable to you in this endeavor (remember you went to them because you liked their 'type' of dog and successes!).
- 4) Linebreed, linebreed, linebreed!

### **What are some of the hardest lessons newcomers have to learn about this breed?**

That after nearly one hundred years there is still a great deal of inconsistency in breed type, and it is being further diversified by judges that assess faults only; consequently, that ends up with mediocre dogs finishing weekend after weekend.

That 'success' is fleeting. That you must constantly work with sound breeding practices as the stepping stone for future generations – alert to the best dogs regardless of who owns them – and the ability to refocus on your vision when you hit that inevitable 'bump in the road.' Be cognizant that a 'look, or type or consistency' that is realized in a program for a couple of generations may be 'lost' in a heartbeat, and never, ever be recovered.

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### What are the most pressing problems you see in our breed?

'Our' dogs have made great strides in the last twenty years; abundant coat, hock hair, and grooming techniques in themselves have given the Sheltie a new 'look'! Add to that the amount of bone, rounded muzzles, and underjaw and it's easy to understand that folks with little breed involvement over that 20 year span would find it hard to believe that many are the same breed? Breeders have made significant improvement too in temperament, health issues – while fronts, rears and drive & reach still are a nemesis to many. Of concern to me personally though are the dogs today without the *proper balance* outlined in the standard; many don't have enough leg under them to be labeled as 'sound, *agile* and sturdy.' Additionally, the standard defines the head as being '*refined*', i.e. "*light*"; look about and tell me how many dogs today you see that you think fit that definition. The wedge of the head should 'taper slightly from ears to nose,' not like a piece of pie that is 1/4 of the whole.

### As an owner/handler what were some of your most memorable wins?

To me *all* wins are special and memorable – dog shows are supposed to be fun – but especially those under breeder judges at Specialties; National placements are always nice too because you never go there 'expecting a win'! It's exciting in those scenarios to be able to showcase your dogs to your peers and gather their opinions (and those of other ringside attendants) of your breeding programs – win or lose, and we've done both!



Since you asked, I guess though that a 'win' that always stick out in my mind as a breeder are those we had with "Java". An "Askem" (*CH. Macdega Asterisk, ROM*) daughter, *CH. Oakdale Rapporlee Java Noire*, took two Group I's from the puppy class, to gather her majors! Last year she also got her ROM; all kudos go to subsequent owner Cindy Holmes for that accomplishment! Way to go Cindy!

As an aside though, I think that too much emphasis is put on winning today, and not on learning, or improving the breed. Folks go to shows, and once their class is done, hurriedly leave and go home, without creating an opportunity to even see who wins the breed, and why! It appears that winning, or lack of it in some cases turns out to be more important than the individual dogs or the breed itself? In some cases, those exhibitors might as well be showing a poodle, for all the loyalty and devotion, and 'love' that they have for their shelties.

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It's no surprise that these folks (many times the 'internet experts') don't seem to stay in dogs long either.

**What advice do you have on choosing a handler if an owner is not able to attend enough shows to work steadily toward a championship or is uncomfortable in the ring?**

Find someone you trust with the care and welfare of your dogs, first & foremost; someone other than just a 'weekend warrior', who provides your dog a 'ride to the show,' "fluffs" and walks into the ring. Dogs that aren't socialized, exercised, vetted, and prepped properly during the week usually are at a big disadvantage come show time. Used to be that a 'handler' was someone with a lot of multi-dog/kennel experience who truly knew how to evaluate, condition, and train a dog, in addition to presenting it to its best – not many of those folks exist in our breed anymore. I have heard of, and have witnessed myself, dogs that spend the entire week crated in small environments and are let out only to be exercised with little 'handler' interaction. Sending dogs to places like that is most often a waste of time and money. Evaluate too, the 'type' of dog you want shown; you might send it to a part of the country where it does not look consistently out of place to the all-breed judges.

**From a judge's perspective - do you have any tips or suggestions for presenting a sheltie in the ring?**

Bring your dogs in clean, to include their teeth! I am often surprised at the number of exhibitors (and 'handlers' too!) that will present a dog to a judge dirty, or with little or no apparent effort in cleaning them beforehand! And coat-wise I just don't mean being free of 'chalk;' there is a big difference in your dog being 'free of substance' and being *clean*. With only about two minutes to present your exhibit, don't blow them out of the water by having one whose breath stinks, has a mouthful of heavy tartar, hasn't had a bath in two months, or still has poop under their butt!

Being prepared will allow you to have fun; it's amazing the way a 'smile' can travel down the lead! Watch the successful handlers and emulate what they do; there is a reason they win often. Make your 'two minutes' count!

**Do you have plans to apply to judge other breeds?**

My involvement in dogs has always been for the love of the Shetland Sheepdog, and not as part of a grand plan to be away from home every weekend after retirement! Currently, I have completed all the requirements for both Collies and Aussies, but have not yet applied – school's still out as to when I might submit my packets. ■

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