

USASA Journal Breeder Interview

By Stevens Parr (2002)

TERRA-BLUE

It may not be a large kennel, but Terra-Blue is demonstrating that “big” isn’t necessarily better. Founder Joni A. Johnson and partner Emmy Adasiewicz don’t hesitate to say so either. Defining terra-blue as a kind of “blue earth” that yields diamonds, they put it this way on their web site: “...we like to think our name represents who we are. Though diamonds are not found in great quantities, their beauty and elegance are admired by all. While we are a small kennel, Terra-Blue Australian Shepherds has produced a number of ‘diamonds’. Our dogs speak for themselves... quality is not necessarily related to quantity.” After nearly fifteen years of testing this philosophy in the breed ring, Joni and Emmy have produced a Hall of Fame Sire, big wins at National Specialties, national rankings, and innumerable breed wins capped by solid successes in the Group ring.

The Terra-Blue story begins in 1980 when Joni Johnson met her first Aussie. Impressed by the dog’s obvious intelligence and devotion to its owner, she kept tabs on the breed, even subscribing to the old *Australian Shepherd Quarterly*. Seven years later she started searching for a breeder and contacted Betsy Atkinson (Hearthside) about getting a puppy. Betsy only had a red tri show bitch available, and Joni thought she would give showing a try. She arranged to pick up her puppy, *Hearthside Social Butterfly*, call name “*Carmen*”, at a rare breed show where she was being exhibited “I hadn’t originally planned on showing,” says Joni, “but the puppy went Best In Show and I was hooked.” “*Carmen*” became her first Aussie.

Unbeknown to Joni, future partner Emmy Adasiewicz was finding her way to Aussies via the same medium: Betsy Atkinson. Emmy was a veteran of 17 years’ obedience competition with German Shepherds. But her German bred dogs differed so much from the competition, she did very little conformation. Following her German Shepherd experience, she did try showing a Sheltie, but the experience just brings laughter now: “you know, no one says: ‘honey, let me help you!’ “ In fact, the last time she showed her Sheltie, some of her competitors were asking out loud: “why does she even bother?” Still, spring of ’88 found her at a rare breed show in Westfield, MA, where she met both Betsy Atkinson and a little black tri puppy, *Hearthside Tuxedo Style*. She bought “*Tux*” immediately.

That summer, Emmy let good friend Alison Smith of *Paradox* drag her and “*Tux*” to an ASCA show in upstate New York. Obviously out of her element, she got emergency coaching from exhibitors ahead and behind. “I was literally getting handling lessons in the ring”. The lessons must have been good, because she took a 5 point major and Best of Winners. “The next day I won again. That was the beginning of the end!”

Those early days were learning days. And mentor to both women – though quite separately – was Betsy Atkinson. “I had a really good foundation and start through her”, recalls Joni. Emmy agrees: “She was an awesome lady to deal with. She was always there when I needed her. I absolutely adored Betsy!” They were also doing their own homework. Joni was moving from her home in upstate New York, to Ohio, back to New York, and then back to Ohio again. She feels strongly that this exposure to Aussies from different regions expanded her vision. All the while, “because I never do things halfway”, she was studying every pedigree she could find. Back in Massachusetts, Emmy was “listening and absorbing”. She says that paying close attention to breeders like Alison Smith, Leslie Frank (*Propwash*), and later, Joni, was immensely helpful to her education in Aussies.

Besides studying, both were showing actively and, in Joni’s case, breeding. What’s remarkable about this period between ’88 and ’92 is that they didn’t know each other, despite a common mentor, and despite owning dogs that mostly trace to the same bitch: *Ch. Brightwoods Society Page*, or “*Chloe*”. Consider the following highlights:

- Emmy finishes *Tux*, who is a *Chloe* son.
- After *Carmen*, Joni buys another puppy out of *Chloe*, *Hearthside Just My Style* or "*Jusse*". *Jusse* is a littermate sister to *Tux*.
- Joni buys and finishes *Ch. Gold Nuggets Vinaigrette CD* ("*Vinnie*").
- After finishing *Tux* Emmy returns to Betsy for another puppy, *Hearthside Risky Business*, "*Risk*". *Risk* is a *Chloe* son sired by Joni and Betsy's *Ch. Gold Nuggets Cordon Bleu*, a half-brother of *Vinnie's*.
- Joni breeds *Carmen* to *Ch. Briarbrooks Center Ring*, *Chloe's* dad, producing *Ch. Windy Oaks Lena of Terra-Blue*, who will become a Premier 10 Bitch at the 1991 ASCA Nationals.
- *Chloe* is bred to multiple titled *Ch. Beauwoods Rustlin' In The Sun*, producing *Ch. Hearthside & Terrablues Beauwood* and *Terra-Blue Tigerlily*, mother of *Ch. Terra-Blue Twice As Hot* and current Special, *Ch. Terra-Blue Missoula*.

In Joni's words: "Everything at Terra-Blue goes back to *Society Page*." Everything except perhaps the partnership with Emmy.

It isn't until 1992 when *Jusse* is bred to *HOF Ch. Agua Dulce Final Option*, and *HOF Ch. Terra-Blue Just Too Hot* ("*Cajun*") is born, that the two paths finally cross. That summer, Emmy recalls, "I wanted another black tri and Betsy didn't have anything, and recommended a black tri boy that Joni had." The "black tri boy" was *Cajun*. He was Joni's pick and not available. But Betsy stepped in, telling Joni about this wonderful show person who might be just right for the puppy. As a result, Emmy and new husband, Paul, honeymooned in upstate New York, looking at puppies. "I just watched him plant himself on the lawn and I instantly knew..." says Emmy. "And somehow I talked her (Joni) into letting him come home with me."

"*Cajun* did not mature right away. He was four before people really noticed. But Em hung in there with him", says Joni. Emmy remembers it the same way: "*Cajun* taught us that you had to be patient with these lines." And the patience was rewarded. He won his AKC championship in four shows, topping the last win with a Group I. In '96 he went into the ASCA Top Ten and won a Selection of Merit at the USASA National Specialty in Ocala, FL. '97 brought an ASCA Pre-Nationals Best of Breed Win and a Pre-Nationals Premier 5 award. At that year's USASA Nationals in Wichita, KS, he was Stud Dog Class Winner. '98 brought another ASCA Top Ten ranking and a Pre-Nationals Premier 10 award. The USASA Nationals in Carlisle, PA, saw him take 2nd place in the Stud Dog Class. Besides an ASCA 11th place ranking in '99, he won a Pre-Nationals Best of Breed as well as a Pre-Nationals Premier 10 award.

Beyond the impressive show record, *Cajun* is now an ASCA Hall of Fame Sire and, pending confirmation, a USASA ROMX III Sire. There are - as of now - over 20 titled dogs to his credit, including *Ch. Lyrics Too Darn Hot*, Winners Bitch at the '00 USASA Nationals in Bakersfield, CA.

"He's an incredibly sweet dog; the easiest dog anyone could have to live with - he's just a real gentleman," says Joni in tribute. "He's been with other males when bitches are in heat, and it's no problem. He's a breeder's dream: an outstanding show dog and an outstanding sire!"

Over the years, *Cajun* drew Emmy and Joni closer together. They would go to shows together and, per Emmy, "We found out we liked the same types." Joni continues: "It was something that evolved over the years, first through *Cajun* and then because we became friends. Also, Emmy loves the boys and, because of the breeding, I keep the bitches. So, originally it was just friendship. But we're both frank and open and that works well. It's nice to have another person to bounce ideas off and who is willing to accept different ideas. That is the basis of our partnership and real friendship." In 2000, Emmy formally joined Terra-Blue as full partner.

These days Terra-Blue is represented by two Specials: *Ch. Arboretums Ilex Montana* (“*Montana*”) and *Ch. Terra-Blue Missoula* (“*Missoula*”). *Montana*, a *Cajun* son, acquired his ASCA championship at the age of 11 months with two 5 point and two 4 point majors. He’s the winner of Best of Breed Puppy and 1st place in 4-6 months Black Tri Puppy Dog Class at the ’98 ASCA Nationals. And he’s the winner of the 12-18 months Dog Class at the ’99 USASA Nationals. *Montana* is *Missoula*’s father (bred to *Terra-Blue Tigerlily*, daughter of the ubiquitous *Chloe*). *Missoula* is the first place winner of the Bred-by-Exhibitor Class at the ’01 USASA Nationals. For Emmy, who did the handling, it was “...the ultimate high. I was in there with Frank (Baylis) and other great breeders. And I was co-breeder. That made it special.”

While the kennel is entering a new phase with a new generation of Aussies, the approach to breeding remains the same. The baseline for Joni is “how well you can take care of your dogs. In the earlier years, I might have kept 10 to 12, but now it’s more like 6. And there the problem is the older, special dogs who can’t leave. And, of course, you need a certain number to breed, so we rely more and more on co-ownerships.” She goes on: “It’s harder to compete with fewer dogs. If you have 10 to 15 litters, you have more to choose from. We have maybe two litters a year. I remember reading in the *AKC Gazette* about the old kennels with their huge numbers. And of course they were able to make progress in their breeds very quickly. We have made a choice not to do that. But we have tried to be selective. So, maybe there won’t be a lot of Terra-Blue dogs, but hopefully when people do see one, they’ll say ‘Boy! That’s a really nice dog!’”

The “selective” process naturally begins with puppies. “I spend a lot of time watching,” says Joni, “but I don’t make any decisions until they’re 7 to 8 weeks old. For the most part the ones I like in the beginning are the ones I like later. (You develop an eye for structure over time.) But I don’t rush to get rid of everyone, because there are always surprises.”

As to show homes, she says: “All of our show pups are co-owned until they’re titled. We don’t sell many, because I’m really picky, and I keep a lot of strings, because of breeding issues. But if people will put up with that, usually it works out well.” And “despite the strings, I work with co-owners and stay flexible. I try to make sure we’re on the same page. As a result, there are very few dogs I’ve needed to replace. I want to be proud of what goes into the ring and I want the person to be happy, so I am probably fairly liberal in my replacement policy.” She concludes: “I feel blessed I had somebody like Betsy who was willing to take a risk with a new person, so I’m willing to work with someone new who is willing to listen.”

As for goals, here is Joni again: “I want every breeding to better the breed. There are way too many unwanted animals on the earth. I have turned people away because I just didn’t think a breeding would help. Just taking someone’s money is a non-issue, except for losing it over the years.” She smiles and continues, “The goal of creating the perfect dog who doesn’t exist... that’s the challenge of breeding and that’s what I love.”

Emmy adds: “I ask myself what are the pluses and minuses of each pedigree. We try to do each breeding so weaknesses are strengthened. We try to strengthen our gene pool and not lose what we have. And it’s hard. Just maintaining the quality we have with *Cajun* can be a challenge.”

“Every litter is different in focus,” observes Joni. We don’t look at just a particular litter. We look several litters in advance, planning the combinations in the years to come that will be possible out of the present litter. We’ve tended to linebreed, because we want consistency in attitude, temperament, type, and movement. But linebreeding too much can compound bad qualities and lose good ones. So we will outcross and then come back in.”

Over the years, Terra-Blue has encountered relatively few genetic problems. However, owning a popular stud dog like *Cajun* almost inevitably means something will go wrong some time. Emmy and Joni have been open with other breeders and members of the fancy. Emmy is plain: “Ultimately, the goal is to improve the breed and

you can't do that if everyone is silent. I mean who is being helped if everyone is silent about the problems within their lines." She acknowledges this policy "can get you stuck with the Scarlet Letter." But she's philosophical about it. "My real joy is in the ring, being with my stud dog. Having a stud dog that everyone wants is just a by-product."

Approaching its second year, the partnership is strong. "We discuss everything," explains Emmy. "Also, it's easy for us to agree, because we're looking for the same thing. There are times we don't agree, but then we hash it out until one of us wins the other over." In fact the two partners have combined so well that the following warning appears on their web site: "And for those of you who may still be confused about who is who... Emmy is the blonde and Joni is the brunette!"

Where does this all go? Joni, who is now beginning to judge, says simply, "I would like people someday to look back at what I did and say that it was done with integrity and honesty." Emmy, who always loves a good joke, laughs. "What do I want on my tombstone? Well, first of all I want a yin/yang symbol for me and Joni. Then underneath I want: 'I'm the blonde!'"