

# **The Specialty, Puppy Dork and Me**

## **By Judith LeRoy**

We've met before. I'm a brown Bearded Collie and my name is Shag. I know, I know ... not a very distinctive name. But when my owners bought me, they were real novices and they thought the name was downright clever. "He's got long, shaggy hair. Shag! Get it??"

As events transpired, they got bit by that dreaded dog show bug early in my adolescence. After a few humiliations (well, OK, more than a few)—like going into the ring with blue bunny barrettes in my hair and wearing a matching pastel blue collar and lead, for starters. Gradually, She Who Feeds Us, my handler, got a little more competent, and I did too. By hook, crook, and a lot of effort to compensate for our lack of expertise, I finished my Championship way sooner than my breeder expected. But then, my breeder probably never expected me to get a championship. I was, after all, sold as "pet quality," which is a notch or two below the exalted "show quality" designation, so my breeder's expectations for me were obviously not very great.

The feat really pleased He Who Walks Us (my other owner). He's a devoted sports fan and my race to the Championship satisfied his rigid criterion for acceptable spectator sport. He shared with everyone (including the mailman and the plumber) all the details of the five-point major that secured a big Purple and Gold Rosette and a "Ch." before my name. He made it sound like a Sammy Sosa World Series home run; a Tom Brady Superbowl touchdown; a thrilling triple play by his much beloved Red Sox, whose lack of success he'd been lamenting all season.

As it transpired, my relatively quick championship had a profound effect on She Who Feeds Us' expectations and thus, it had a huge impact on my life. Thinking back, I know now that I should have slowed down and made my show career last longer. Maybe ten years or so. A couple more show ring disasters, a few ego-deflating fiascos ... it would have been good for her and, in the end, it would have made my life simpler. Ah, if dogs could predict how human minds worked, life would be so much simpler. But most humans don't know their own minds, so why would they offer their dogs the opportunity to do so?

In a nutshell, my quick championship whetted her appetite for more show ring success. Instead of resting on her owner-handler laurels, she decided she needed another puppy ... another Bearded Collie. She said it was to keep me company, but I sure the heck didn't need company. The real reason: Ta dah! She wanted A Show Dog—which is a helluva lot different from what she wanted when she went out to buy me, a family pet. "If I did so well with Shag, imagine what heights I could scale with a REAL show dog!"

Trust me, the new puppy, the object of all her Westminster-winning fantasies, wasn't named anything cutesy like "Shag." But I'm getting ahead of myself, here. The good news: Old Shag got the last laugh!

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It was a summer Saturday. She Who Feeds Us and He Who Walks Us had just finished breakfast. He was buried in his newspapers. He wasn't reading the Sports section, primarily because his favored teams weren't doing very well, and the sports news depressed him. She was idly flipping pages of an old AKC Gazette. She seemed preoccupied.

And there I was, under my ceiling fan, my tummy cooling in the gentle breeze. The ultimate chill-out. Or, it would have been except for the puppy-sized white paw that nudged my side spastically at unpredictable intervals. The paw belonged to Puppy Dork; whose small brown body was stretched out beside me. He was obviously in the thrall of a thrilling dream.

I had named him Puppy Dork, PD for short, because he was one. The name She Who Feeds Us calls him is Travis. His real name—get this now—is Stargazer Lone Traveler. Ridiculous! To my memory (and my memory is elephantine), Travis had never traveled alone in the five long months I'd known him. He stuck to my side like glue. I turned around, Bang! A collision. When I ate, his nose was in my bowl. I woke up in the morning, and he was in my bed. I went out in the backyard and lifted my leg, yes—you've got it—he got a wet head. A real Dork!

His eyelids were rolling now, his ears twitching, and limbs thrashing. The nudging against my ribs accelerated to pummeling. To save myself bruises, I reluctantly prepared to vacate my comfy spot. But I, the ultimate canine eavesdropper, paused as She Who Feeds Us said to He Who Walks Us:

"Sure has been nice weather this week."

"Humph ..."

"We could use some rain, though."

"Mmmm."

"I entered Shag and Travis in the National Specialty."

It took about a minute, but he finally realized the import of the message. He lowered the paper and scowled a bit.

"What? When?? Why???"

"The Specialty. Next month. Because EVERYONE will be there!"

We all knew that "Everyone" meant "All my Beardie friends." And we all also knew that when she got that tone in her voice, it's a done deal. WE WERE GOING TO THE SPECIALTY! The dog show of all dog shows. The show where all the leading dogs of our breed and all the breeders of note come together to compete. The Bearded Collie National Specialty.

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Things got a little frenzied after that.

She started adding yoghurt, Oil of Primrose, Ginseng, and little seeds to our dinner. (Puppy-Dork and I stopped eating.) She gave us baths every two days because "dirty coats break off." (We ran whenever she turned on a faucet.) We went to conformation class three times a week. (We hid when she got out the show leads.)

It was a trying time. Whenever she wasn't feeding, bathing, or practicing, she was on the telephone. She talked to my breeder, Puppy Dork's breeder, and at least 2,000 other Beardie

people. The favorite topics—the judge, the judge, the judge; and which big time "Specials" were going to be at the Specialty. Specials are dogs who've finished their Championships. Dogs like me. Well, maybe not just like me. They were dogs that went to shows every weekend to compete for Herding Group wins and Best in Show awards. I don't do that.

Every night at supper she reported the latest findings to a wildly enthusiastic He Who Walks Us. For example:

"Brenda says that Travis has a really good chance under this judge. She likes expression."

"Huh?"

"Joanne says that Ch. Empire's Prince of Dales has it sewed up. He'll win Best in Specialty. The judge gave him a Group 1 in April. And Sweetface Gimme Kisses should go Best Op." (That's Best of Opposite Sex, second place after the Best in Specialty canine, for the uninformed.)

"Oh."

"Jean says that the judge probably won't put up Shag. She wouldn't know a good moving dog if she saw one."

"You don't say."

"Alison says that the judge is a real headhunter and doesn't give a hoot about conformation. Shag probably doesn't stand a chance."

"Really."

She peered at him to see if he really was listening. Then she tested, "Betty says we have to shave the dogs' feet because the judge is a real nut about paw mats."

"What??!?"

But the really important stuff came in smidgeons around categorical statements about the judge's genealogy, physiology, psychology, and drinking habits. I learned I was entered in Best of Breed against all the "Specials," Puppy Dork was in the 6-9 month puppy class. Puppy Dork was *not* entered in the Round Robin but was entered in Sweepstakes, and I was entered in the Parade of Champions.

I sure hoped they'd have a band and a drum majorette and some clowns and horses for the Parade of Champions. I saw the Fourth of July Parade last year, so I knew what to expect. But a Round Robin was a bit more enigmatic. There were some pretty square ones chirping in our backyard early this spring, but I couldn't remember hearing about a round one before. Puppy Dork wondered if a round robin could fly.

And Sweepsteaks? I've heard of T-bone, sirloin, and strip, but I'd never heard He Who Walks Us complain about a tough sweepsteak at the dinner table. Puppy Dork wondered that, if he won, did he get to eat it? He had tried to eat the judge's straw hat at his first match, but he said he'd much prefer red meat.

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The night before we left for the Specialty, Puppy Dork and I were curled up in our beds in the corner of bedroom. Just before she put out the light, my Mistress said, "You know, Travis has been coming along really well in conformation class. He might be "Specials" material. I just might campaign him seriously."

PD stopped mouthing my blue fuzzy doll.

"Shag? What's she talking about?"

"A Special is a dog who lives out of a suitcase and spends most of his time flying to dog shows. He has more frequent flyer miles than the ambassador to Borneo. He lives with strangers, is always on a diet and gets a daily bath," I muttered drowsily. (Sometimes I can't help myself; he was so gullible he believed everything I told him.) "Go to sleep."

"What would happen to my new red squeaky ball?"

Time to end this conversation: "You'd have to leave it home with me, along with your stuffed lamb, your platypus, your green frog, your red dragon, your yellow bunny, and ..."

"Stop!" yelled PD, his eyes squeezed tight shut.

The lights went off.

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It was a long, long ride to the National Specialty. PD didn't say much. Either did I. Neither did He Who Walks Us. She was pretty full of herself, though.

"I just can't wait to have Jean see Travis. She'll love his front. She thinks his pedigree is absolutely beautiful—goes back to Bartholomew's Bearded Bandit five times in seven generations."

I remembered when this woman thought a pedigree was a manicure for her toenails. She'd used my pedigree for a place mat! Now she talked fondly about illustrious dead dogs like they were her own personal ancestors. She knew their fancy names, their pet names, probably even what their owners called them when they piddled on the carpet.

"Well, what about Shag's pedigree?" He roused himself briefly from highway hypnosis to inquire.

"Well, Shag's got a nice enough pedigree, but he's not linebred like Travis. And everybody says that the judge won't particularly like his type."

The linebred Wonder of the West snored loudly beside me. They should have improved those adenoids when they genetically engineered this model. And what did she mean, the judge won't like my type? Smart, suave, articulate, debonair animal that I am—who could resist me??

"This particular judge will do any darn thing she wants to. You wouldn't believe who she put up last time she judged," said my Mistress in a much-aggrieved tone.

"I know, I know," muttered my Master. And to prove he'd been listening to her telephone talk, he added smugly, "and she toes out in the rear, has a bad bite, and doesn't have enough backskull."

That ended the conversation for a while.

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We got to the hotel, registered, and headed up to our room. Puppy Dork met the elevator at the parking lot level and refused to get in.

"It's making strange noises, Shag," he complained. "And I don't believe in traveling in boxes."

Considering his strong feelings about crates, that statement was not surprising. He Who Walks Us and Puppy Dork walked up five flights of stairs while She Who Feeds Us and I rode the elevator. The elevator stopped at the lobby level and a dog and his minion got on. The dog's nose was in the air and his coat trailed on the ground. His minion's nose was likewise engaged, though his frame was covered in denim, not hair. His well-coiffed hair looked like it was died to match the dog's.

"Hi," I said conversationally to the regal beast—the dog, not his minion—"My name's Shag, and I'm here for the Specialty."

He lowered his aristocratic gaze and disdainfully studied my coat. "My name's Prince, and I'm here to win it."

She Who Feeds Us was staring at Prince, awestruck. She began an inane conversation with Prince's manservant; I promised myself I'd find Prince's room and pee on his door before this Specialty was over.

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The next day dawned, and it was time for the Sweepstakes. Puppy Dork got brushed within an inch of his life. She and PD headed down to the ring. Master and I elected to stay in the room snoozing.

They weren't gone long. She barreled into the room with Puppy Dork in tow.

"How did it go?" he inquired cheerfully from the bed.

"I don't want to talk about it," said she, slamming the only interior door in the room—to the bathroom.

I heard water running.

"What happened?" I asked PD.

"Not much," said PD.

"I gathered that," I said dryly. "What did you do?"

"Oh, I ran around the ring a couple times and sat down and left."

He was being uncharacteristically evasive. While I was pondering this, she emerged from the bathroom.

"You know what that crazy puppy did?" She didn't wait for an answer. "He plastered his nose to the ground and wouldn't lift it. He inched around the ring like a tortoise!"

I looked at PD. He shrugged. "Ground smelled nice. Like worms."

It was true that PD liked worms. And ants. He watched them for hours in the backyard. And bees and flies and butterflies. He tried to herd a toad last week. Like I said, this was one strange pup.

"Then, when it was time for the judge to go over him, he lay down and wouldn't get up." She glared accusingly at PD.

He was unconcerned. "I got tired," he said to me.

"You'll never get to be a Special, that way," I commented.

"Hmmm ..." was all PD had to say.

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The Parade of Champions was anticlimactic. No bands, No floats, no clowns ... just a bunch of barking Beardies. What a letdown! Then came Dog judging. It was time for PD to go into the ring for the 6-9 month Puppy Dog class. She Who Feeds Us was really worked up.

"He's such a great puppy," she kept repeating as she powdered, brushed, and combed him. "Everybody says so. He just has to do something today. He got all the nonsense out of system yesterday," she reported hopefully.

PD looked noncommittally at the ceiling.

He Who Walks Us and I went down to watch. I curled up next to his lawn chair on the cool green grass and prepared for the worst. The look on PD's face as he entered the ring didn't bode well.

They lined up. She got him set up, but PD decided to check out the puppy behind him. PD whirled around just as the judge's eyes focused on him. She Who Walks Us got him turned around again and stacked fairly decently but ... too late! The judge had moved down the line.

The judge came back for another look, and PD suddenly lurched forward to grab the tail of the puppy in front of him who turned around and seized the aggressor by his ear.

PD and the other puppy went down in a writhing heap. Other Puppy's handler glared at She Who Walks Us, who was futilely trying to unwind PD's lead from Other Puppy's front legs. Eight thrashing puppy appendages flailed the air.

Puppy Behind couldn't stand it. He broke loose from his startled handler and leapt on PD and Other Puppy. Three more puppies lunged against their leads, barking madly as they tried to enter the fray.

Chaos!

PD, Other Puppy, and Puppy Behind were a tangled mass. It was like those Australian tag-team wrestling matches they play on TV Saturday night, except these guys were four-legged Hulk Hogans in fur coats and tails.

The seven puppies who were not yet actively engaged yanked furiously on their leads, barking madly, or cowered timorously behind their handlers. The struggling humans all stared daggers at She Who Feeds Us—who was ineffectually yelling at PD. PD was deservedly flattened at the bottom of the puppy pile. He couldn't get out if he wanted to. I could only faintly hear his muffled barks and squeaks. The dogs outside the ring were on their feet now, vocalizing as they saw the fun they were missing.

Bedlam!!

It took five minutes, but order was finally restored. The perspiring judge put PD at the front of the line—but it was to keep him out of trouble, not because she intended to reward him. The other exhibitors crowded together at the other end of the ring, madly grooming and brushing their disheveled charges. They avoided proximity to PD like he was carrying Bubonic Plague fleas.

PD was an ungodly mess. The hair on his head was plastered down over his eyes, and his left ear was puppy-saliva slimed. The rest of his coat stood out in weird spikes, like a punk rock star's pre-concert coiffeur.

He stood, panting, with legs akimbo as the judge went over him. He shuffled off on his Down and Back like a bruised, exhausted Chicago Bears defensive tackle after a long and grueling football game with the Green Bay Packers. It wasn't pretty. On his way back, he spied a butterfly outside the ring and stopped dead in his tracks, assessing his energy level for a spirited chase. She, unprepared, stumbled over him.

The Dynamic Duo staggered upright, and Puppy-Dork lumbered on, flopping unceremoniously on the judge's feet.

No surprise. The Great Brown Hope didn't win. He didn't place. He didn't even make the cut. He Who Walks Us and I exchanged furtive looks and hurried back to the room.

She and PD arrived there shortly after we did. She was despondent. PD was enthusiastic. "These Specialties are really fun!" he confided to me.

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The next day we had off, since it was the Beardie Girls' day. PD and I hung around the room and snoozed while she crept out to make amends for PD's misconduct.

"They're treating me like Typhoid Mary," she wailed. "Even my friends are avoiding me!"

She spent the rest of the day in the room, often sighing—obviously reliving the ignoble events of the day before.

"Poor Mom," He Who Walks Us murmured during our evening stroll that night. "Her fantasies about of Travis' glorious moment at Westminster took a big hit yesterday. Shag, you'll have to see what you can do to brighten her spirits tomorrow. Just be good, OK?"

Since he'd put it that way, what could I do? I guessed I'd have to be good.

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The morning of the infamous Best Of Breed competition arrived. It was the last day, the climax of the National Specialty. The Big Event. She got out the brushes and combs, washed my feet and beard, but I could tell her heart wasn't in it. I tried to be encouraging. I didn't yank my feet away when she cut my nails. I didn't try to eat the toothbrush when she brushed my teeth. She was too glum to notice that I wasn't my usual perverse, uncooperative grooming-day self.

Off we went to the ring. God-of-All-Dogs-and-Humans, I had never seen so many Beardies in one place in all my life!! And there, at the very front of the line, stood Prince, posturing regally.

The judge strode around the ring, scanning the dogs. I realized that She Who Feeds Us was about as nervous as I'd seen her since the match that began my show career. She wasn't gonna be much help, today!

We went 'round the ring with the other dogs, and—if I might say so myself—we did a creditable job. I didn't pull on my lead, which I usually do; I didn't lag, which I sometimes do; I remembered to point my feet—all of them—in the right direction. I held my head up proudly, and I didn't bark. My tail was no higher than level. She looked down at me with a surprised look on her face after we finished the circuit.

We got to relax until it was time for my individual exam, but I remained alert in case the judge looked my way. She Who Feeds Us, nerves under better control, began to watch me warily in the manner of a Scotland Yard Bomb Detective who has just found a ticking, brown paper wrapped parcel in the dumpster at Victoria Station. No question about it, she was waiting for the worst and she knew it often came after I tricked her into a false sense of security.

Voila! I didn't budge during the physical exam and my down and back was flawless—my approach to the judge was forthright and my posture, as I stopped, superb. While I had the judge's attention, I smiled ingratiatingly and made the most of the moment, applying a little Beardie mind control:

"My brother was a real Dork the other day and messed up your ring. I'm trying hard to make up for it. She Who Feeds Us is an OK sort of person and she feels real bad. She's gonna be a real pain in the neck all the way home if someone around here doesn't score."



Was that a slight smile the judge gave me before she went on to the next dog?

We were in that ring for hours! I was hot, thirsty, and my bladder was getting mighty full. The good news was that there were fewer and fewer dogs in the ring with me and, every time the judge looked at me, she seemed more and more interested. I kept on strutting.

She Who Feeds Us said to me, "I can't believe it, Shag. I really think she likes us! You're doing a great job."

No kidding, Red Rider!

The judge was down to a measly dozen or so dogs now and she was really pondering the situation. The crowd around the ring was silent—even the dog spectators woke up to watch the ring proceedings. I stood up tall and proud—as tall and proud as my full bladder would permit, and ...

The judge pointed at Ch. Sweetface Gimme Kisses and the crowd roared!! Best In Specialty to a Beardie girl!

My spirit sagged. Then she chose Best Of Winners—the winner of all the non-champion dog classes. Another Beardie girl!

But now, Oh-my-God, she pointed to me! Best Of Opposite Sex to me, Shag!! I pranced across the ring to stand near those cute little bitches who smiled and batted their six-inch long lashes at me. She Who Feeds Us stood beside me in a total daze. Someone should tell her to close her mouth before a fly explores her back molars.

The judge was now awarding Selects. Here comes Prince, looking grumpy. The crowd continued to cheer. The dogs threw muzzles in the air, and their barks added to the din. In the turmoil, I casually sidled back to where Prince was standing and lifted my leg. Ahh ... blessed relief!!

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Well, it was over. The congratulations were received, the car packed, and we were homeward bound.

Puppy Dork was lying on his back snoring, and she was still talking. It had been non-stop verbiage for 300 miles.

"Well, I just knew she'd like Shag if only we could hang in there. That judge really knows movement!"

Is this the same judge we were discussing before the Specialty?

"And expression. Shag's got melting expression. The judge just kept looking into his beautiful brown eyes like they were communing or something ..."

Lucky for her, we were. I told that judge I needed to win something!

"You know, Kissie's owner talked to me about Shag's stud fee."

Aha! This is getting interesting!

"I really would like to have him bred to a really good bitch to see what he can produce—he's got this wonderful pedigree going back to dogs we just don't see in pedigrees anymore. And he can lend some outcross vigor to some of these really tight linebred pedigrees you see around now days."

Her voice was mildly disapproving as she contemplated those poor, unfortunate, tightly linebred dogs she was lauding only three short days before.

Oh, how times change. She reached back to scratch my ears and her eyes glazed over as she planned Old Shag's future. Puppy Dork opened his eyes.

"It's OK, Shag. I'll take care of your blue fuzzy dolly while you're on the road being a Special and getting frequent flier miles." His eyes sparkled. "But I sure hope I can go to the Specialty again next year. What a blast!!"