

Do you know Bo Bengtson? **Bohem Whippets, Ojai, California** **www.bohemwhippets.com**

Introduction by Iva Kimmelman, Merci Isle

I met Bo in 1977 when he judged the AWC Western Specialty. He happened to like a bitch of my breeding, Ch. Merci Isle The Sting, and gave her BOW for 5 pts with Rosemary Sutton on the other end of the lead. All the women at that show were swooning over the tall handsome gentleman from Sweden, and I was among them. We have been close friends since then.

Bo is worthy of all our admiration for his contributions as a writer and spokesman on all our behalf. Especially now, when the purebred dog fancy is in the cross hairs of so many misguided zealots. He has recently been the recipient of numerous writing awards, and was honored AGAIN and received the Alliance of Purebred Dog Writers Stonehenge Award right before Westminster this year. Whatever he touches in the world of the written word turns to gold, it seems. Sighthound Review, Dogs in Review, and The Sighthound Magazine, have been huge successes due to the involvement of Bo and his partner, Paul Lepiane. Add to that, two editions of The Whippet, and his newest book, Best In Show, and a new book in the works, and one might ask, who else in Whippets in particular, and dogs in general, has done so much for so many.

However, there is more to Bo than his writing. He started in dogs in 1959, Whippets in 1961, bred his first Whippet litter in 1966, and has bred and co-bred 40 litters since then, for a total of 121 Champions, of which 101 are Whippets. Some 77 of those were bred or co-bred by Bo. Bo has bred or owned 13 Specialty BIS winners in the US. This has to be some sort of record – certainly by someone who has bred on a very small scale.

One of the ironies of life in dogs, at least for me, is how two of my best friends often disagree with my opinions about dogs, judges, breedings, etc. Bo is one of them. Still, isn't that what real friendship is about?

Interview of Bo by Eva Engvall, Tangens

Bo Bengtson, the breeder

The beginning. What were you thinking? What were your plans? What drove you? Who helped you? Anything you should have done differently?

I wasn't thinking! I was 14 years old! I didn't have any plans – I just knew that dog shows were what I wanted to be a part of. I absorbed everything like a sponge – just listened, watched and read. I was going entirely by instinct, but I knew I wanted to experience as much as possible of anything to do with dogs. That's why I went to Whippet shows in England several times every year in the 1960s when I was a teenager: I had no money and I still don't understand how I managed to do

that, but it was like a life necessity. I guess I was pretty driven

If it weren't for the dogs I'm sure I wouldn't have traveled nearly as much, or gone to the U.S. by boat in 1967 and then traveled across the whole country by Greyhound bus, ending up at a kennel in California and going to UCLA for six months when I was not feeding puppies or picking up dog poop

Of course I made a lot of mistakes but I don't see how that could have been avoided, since I was pretty much on my own and didn't have any mentors. Maybe it was smart not to be satisfied with the dogs we had in Sweden then – I had seen enough in books and magazines to know there were better dogs out there than those we had. But I was just really lucky to be around when Whippets in England were at a peak, and that the dogs I liked best were those from the Laguna kennel at a time when their dogs were so influential in both England and America, more than almost any other kennel has been since then. That I was able to spend a couple of summers at Laguna and work with their dogs was probably the most useful experience I had in those years.

I'm not sure what I could have done differently. It was not easy trying to make a living, go to school (and later, university), travel as much as I wanted to do, and still keep a couple of dogs. It's really surprising I managed to breed anything at all.

How many generations of Bohem champions have you produced?

Not that many generations: in 40+ years you could have 20 generations or more, but I don't like to breed from really young dogs. The puppies born last year are out of Ch. Bohem Some Like It Hot, who is out of Ch. Bohem Ooh-La-La, who is out of Ch. Bohem All About Eve, who is out of Ch. Bohem Of Thee I Sing, who was out of Ch. Bohem I Hear Singing, who was sired by Ch. Bohem American Way, who was out of Ch. Bohem Mae West... who was sired by Ch. Fleeting Flamboyant out of a daughter of Ch. Laguna Leader, my early imports. You could say that's 11 generations, I guess. (BTW, I had to look this up – I couldn't remember on my own...)

Creating pedigrees that are filled with my own dogs has never been a priority. I got one of my best-ever litters by Ch. Starline's Reign On – seven champions from eight puppies. (They are long-lived, too: ALL eight are still alive and well at nearly 13!) And I bred very successfully several times to different Chelsea dogs: Drake (Ch. Chelsea Drakkar of Oxford), Rush (DCh. Chelsea Gold Rush of Keynote) and Davis (DCh. Chelsea Long Kiss Goodnight).

But it's fun to see that kind of pedigrees, because the Some Like It Hot litter last year is sired by Swedish Ch. Wolf Tone Viking; this brings in some of

my early American dogs: Viking is sired by Ch. Bohem Flight Time, and his dam goes back to Ch. Bohem Cal-las of Whippoorwill, the first U.S. Whippet ever to become a champion in Scandinavia. However, I did that breeding at least as much because Viking also brings in some Signum/Merci Isle blood that I really admire.

Name the dogs of your breeding that you are most proud of?

Of the old dogs probably Ch. Bohem Mome Rath in Sweden, one of the few from that era who I think would still look good today. He was criminally overlooked as a sire by almost everyone, including me. (He was owned by a teenage girl, who loved him but was not always easy to deal with.) Of the more recent ones definitely Ch. Bohem C est la Vie: she caused the most headlines after being lost at JFK after Westminster three years ago, but she really was about as close to ideal as I'll ever expect to get plus she had an amazing temperament, very strong and smart and self-sufficient. Not that she was perfect; I'd have liked a softer eye and expression.

Have you (and others) encountered (health and other) problems in the past?

Health didn't really seem like a problem in the past. Now I wonder if I was just blind, because of course the health problems we're having in the breed today didn't emerge out of nothing. Certainly no young or middle-aged dogs died of heart problems in those days, at least not that I was aware of, but there was demodectic mange (serious cases), which I have hardly seen in recent years, and in one of his first litters one of my dogs sired a couple of cleft palates, which also I have not seen in several decades.

I wish we knew more about the health of the famous old dogs in our pedigrees. I found out only recently that e.g. Eng. Ch. Laguna Ligonier lived to a great old age and seemed very healthy but that's not something that we really questioned in those days. One famous champion I knew was put down with influenza at barely nine years of age; he coughed a lot, but now of course I wonder if he had a heart problem. It's not something that anyone talked about in those days and there were no tests.

In the early days, there were the big breeders. Now we have small breeders (the smaller the better?). Pros and cons?

Certainly some of the big old kennels kept dogs under conditions that we today would not consider acceptable more like cattle than anything else. Not that a small kennel is necessarily better: there's no reason you can't keep a dozen dogs or more happy if you have the right facilities and enough time or if you have really, really good kennel help. (But who does?) Others shouldn't have more than one

or two dogs, or none at all! I hate to generalize, but I don't think most people can responsibly breed more than one or two litters a year, though: you have to be a lot more people - and service-oriented than most of us are to put all the puppies in the right homes and also provide the back-up service that's required.

There is always a lot of talk about improving the breed. In what ways has the breed improved since you started (better pets, more beautiful, faster, healthier, etc)? How and in what way will it improve in the future? What is your vision of the Whippet 50 years from now? Or even 10!!

I don't know if improving is the right word. Certainly the Whippets are more appealing now to a modern eye; looking back at photos of dogs I thought were wonderful in the 1960s and 70s I'm wondering what I was thinking and of course most of the dogs from even earlier times are simply so badly put together anatomically that they look a lot less attractive than much older artistic representations from the 1800s or even earlier. Sometimes I wonder how much this is due to the way the dogs were stacked and photographed; I'd love to see how some of the really old dogs would look if they were around today.

But I'm not sure we have better Whippets today, in the sense of what the breed was originally meant to be. It's interesting that although there are so few candid snapshots of non-show Whippets from the early 1900s they almost invariably look much more pleasing to a modern eye than the stacked and posed show winners of the same period.

The main concern for the future is health, of course. If we can't bequeath Whippets that are at least as healthy as they were in the past to the future generation of breeders, then we have failed regardless of conformation improvement.

I suspect that the Whippet in 50 years time will be almost as different to us as we think the dogs from 50 years ago were. It's probably just as well that I'm not likely to be around for that. In ten years time I don't think the change is going to be so obvious that we will even notice, though.

**Bo Bengtson, the judge
How does a judge survive judging?**

Good question! I didn't, obviously. AKC killed off my wish to continue judging their shows, at least for the time being. They really don't make it fun, what with all the paperwork and that whole nanny state attitude. Judging dogs is really fascinating when you have a good entry of a breed you care about, but it's also a lot of hard work, physically, and I really hate all the BS that comes with the territory, the second-guessing and people trying to find ulterior motives for what's usually simply what the judge thought

was the right thing to do at the time. I promise you that judging is a lot less crooked than most people think it is, but it can also be a lot more ignorant than most people would even imagine!

What are you actually judging? Isn't this an art rather than a science? Don't tell me that the standard is exact!

It's not that complicated, is it? If you are a judge you have to have a very clear mental image of what the breed you're judging should look like. Then you simply see how the dogs being shown fit that image, and the one that comes closest wins.

Of course the standard isn't exact, but if you judge you must have a very clear interpretation of it. I always read over the standard again before an assignment, and it never fails to amaze me how the words conjure up the image of what I think is the Perfect Whippet.

Of all the people showing dogs at a show, most go home losers. How do you deal with the criticism of judges? Does the opportunity to put your hands on many dogs and the traveling and the wining and dining make up for this?

The criticism doesn't bother me at all if it's about the dogs: we all see dogs differently, we all have slightly different ideals, and even the best judges screw up sometimes. What I really hate is when people impute ulterior motives that don't have anything to do with the dogs. I don't know about other judges, but I genuinely barely notice the people when I judge. (At one show I judged last year I remember thinking I had put up the same person for pretty much every single major award—and it was not until the photos were taken that I realized they were two different handlers. I'm not going to say who they were, because handlers actually get upset if you don't recognize them.)

The wining and dining usually consists of eating pizza alone in a hotel room, and the traveling doesn't appeal to me the way it used to when I was younger. I have to admit, though, that it's pretty cool that judging dogs has let me see large chunks of the world I probably wouldn't have been to otherwise. Latin America, Asia, Australia (I lived in Sydney for a year) and New Zealand, different parts of Europe, etc. A couple of years ago I was asked to go to China; I was very hesitant about that but it turned out to be a fantastic trip. I'm still going to judge abroad: in April I'm going to Italy and get a few days in Venice and Rome at the same time, in July I'm judging at the Hound Show in England, in September in Japan, etc. etc. It's a privilege, it really is.

If you could change the way AKC evaluates breeding stock, i.e. the show design, how would you do it?

First, I would let anyone judge who can fill out a simple questionnaire about AKC show rules, and second, I'd like to have freedom classes like at some horse shows, where the dogs are presented without a handler so the judge has no idea who's who.

The International Whippet? Are there still differences in different parts of the world? What can we learn from other countries and organizations?

Not nearly as much as there used to be: now you find American breeding pretty much everywhere—even in England! There are still differences, but I think a lot of it is in the presentation: I remember talking to an American spectator at a foreign show, and she was saying how different the dogs looked. Well, she was looking at a class where almost every single dog was American-bred! We focus a lot more on showmanship and expert handling in this country than elsewhere. Perhaps we go a little more for beauty show while e.g. the Europeans go more for correct conformation.

If you want specifics I'd say e.g. Great Britain has much better top and under-lines than we do, and we have better sidegait, longer necks, and better heads, ears and eyes.

What I really like about e.g. Scandinavia is that dog shows are still a real hobby for most people. Sure, they can learn about ring etiquette and handling from us, but we can learn a lot about having a perspective on the whole dog sport.

**Bo Bengtson, the writer-historian
When did you discover that you could write and that you were interested in history?**

The idea of making a living out of writing seemed pretty far-fetched when I was a kid. Then I sent a couple of short items to a dog magazine, they got published, and before I knew it I had a pet column in a big city daily newspaper and wrote my first dog book when I was 22.

History seemed really boring to me then; I think it is to most young people. It was basically through the dogs that I discovered how interesting it can be: not just what the dogs were like but what people's lives were like. I started with the Victorians, partly because it was they who started the whole purebred dog craze, but also because they were just close enough that you can relate to them, or at least think you can—and then you take

it from there. It's amazing to me how much great live information is preserved in other areas, and how careless we've been in dogs, not even trying to save our history.

How do you do it; what is your day like? How do you keep track of the details of the history? What kind of file system do you have? What do you have in the works? And after that?

Well, I work at home, I have a lot of books and a garage full of old magazines, clippings and records but they are not really well filed. Fortunately, whenever I look for anything I always find something that's interesting and useful maybe not what I was looking for in the first place, though. I've saved a lot of stuff for decades, and some of it is really good reference but I make a point of throwing out a ton of magazines once a year, after I've torn out any articles that may be useful.

Really one of the reasons I wanted to write my Best in Show book that came out last year was to put all the information I had collected between two covers. It took about four years to complete that book, but of course there was a lot of stuff I couldn't fit in, or couldn't find, or was not aware of at the time so maybe the next edition will be the book I always wanted to write.

I have just completed the manuscript for the next edition of my Whippet book (with great help from Lisa Costello on the multi-purpose dogs and the veterinary chapter, by the way). I had no idea so much had happened in Whippets in the last 15 years, but I learned a lot! It's over 100,000 words and now we're working on the 200 illustrations and captions, which is a big deal, trying to sort out what's best from several thousand Whippet images that I have. The publisher is a little nervous, because the book is twice as big as it was meant to be, and in the current economic climate I don't blame them, but they have promised that it WILL be published but it will take longer than planned. (We're aiming at having it ready by the AWC National next year.)

I'm also working as editorial consultant (or editor-at-large) for both Dogs in Review and the Sighthound Magazine, and there are always a few freelance articles in the works. My publisher has some ideas for future books, but I'm not so sure about that.

I'd like something quick and easy for a change.

I only have two dogs now but really want another like an idiot I did NOT keep the only bitch in the only litter I've co-bred in the last several years. If my young adult bitch passes all her health tests there may even be another Bohem litter.

And then I want to retire to Hawaii and grow bananas

Anything you would like to add?

Well, maybe a couple of things I am proud of related to my dogs. I don't breed much but I like to take a chance on newcomers, and that's worked pretty well for everybody. I counted for this interview, and at least 45 new Whippet fanciers got their first champion in this breed from Bohem. Most of them showed their dogs to the title on their own, too. It's great getting phone calls from someone who just won their first points or finished their first Whippet that you sold them as a puppy!

Another thing I'm happy about is the fact that for such a small kennel my dogs have had a fair amount of influence abroad. I have exported a few dogs that have produced really well, so there are champion offspring of Bohem dogs in at least 30 countries now, possibly more. It's a big responsibility to send a dog abroad, both to the dog and to the foreign buyer, but when everyone is happy it's a really good feeling, and it's nice that Whippets from many different American breeders are now appreciated much more almost everywhere in the world than they used to be.

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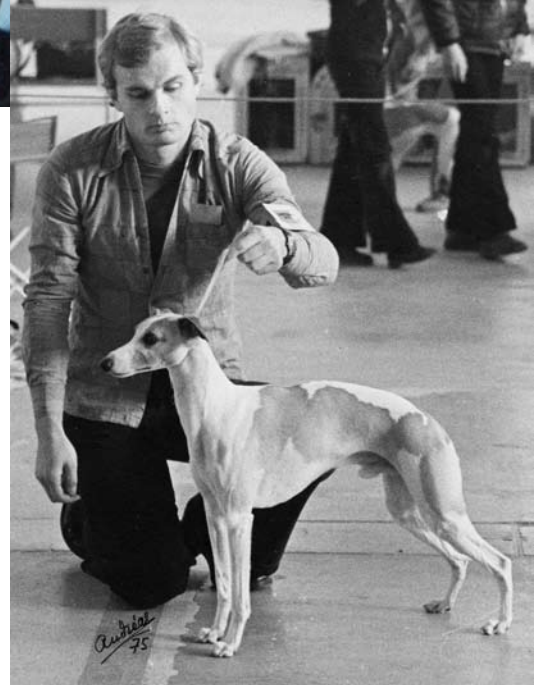
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Bo: the breeder and Whippet fan

Bo on the couch with his gang



Below: Bo with "Chili" SBIS
Ch Bohem Three Ring Circus



right:

Ch Bohem Mome Rath Sweden in 1975

"Twas brillig, and the slithy toves
Did gyre and gimble in the wabe;
All mimsy were the borogoves,
And the mome raths outgrabe"
Lewis Carrol



FCI International Champion and World Winner 2006

Ch Bohem Time Flies "Timmy"

Multi Ch Bohem Flight Time x Ch Bohem All About Eve
Owner: Rita Vanhaeren, Belgium

BIS & SBIS Ch Bohem C'est La Vie "Vivi"

BIS & SBIS Chelsea Long Kiss Goodnight x Ch Bohem All About Eve
Owned by Bo Bengtson, Jill Walton, and Paul Lepiane



Bo: Judge Writer/Historian



First assignment in the US 1977
BOS: Ch Wameda's Tiger Eye

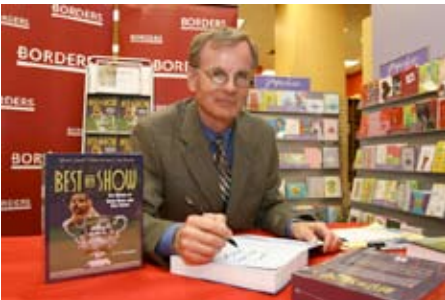


Judging AWC Futurity in 1986
Winner: (Ch) High Flyer Glamorous Glennis



Judging Westminster in 2009

BOB Ch Sporting Fields Glory Bound
Ch Sportingfields Hot Topic x Ch Sportingfield Paris N'River Chase



Signing books

Judging the Finnish National in 1996
BOB Ch Autumn Terra Bella I'm Redee

