

The Backstory

Judy Cunningham – Vikentor Basenjis

Laura Pond Interview

1. How did you get started in Basenjis?

I met my first Basenji in 1968. In the evenings I would take my German Shepard down to the high school field to run. One night this little red dog came over. They ran and played pretty rough and for a long time, yet the little dog kept going. The owner said he was a Cambria Basenji and I was fascinated. Duke needed a buddy as I worked full time. I didn't want another large dog and no more hair. About a month later I went into a pet store and there was a Basenji female for sale. (Yes, I knew no better). She was 6 months old and never even potty trained. She slept with my sister so would pee on my bed. She chewed things up and loved garbage. In 1969 I was accepted to grad school in Colorado. There was no way I could rent a place with this little critter, so I found a good home for her and off I went.

When I finished my degree, I had a new MS degree and a new 8-week-old Basenji pup that I bought from a breeder. I saw there was a match in Colorado and took her to have some fun. Immediately I was accosted by a well-known Colorado breeder who told me off for buying a puppy from a backyard breeder. As soon as the snow cleared, I headed back to Northern California with my shepherd, my Basenji and a horse. This puppy was a doll. She housebroke herself on the trip and did everything I taught her. I had purchased a 1-acre parcel with a house and barn. I worked the pm shift at a local laboratory and the pup was loose in the house learning from my shepherd. She trained him to get food off the counter that she could smell. He trained her to be a good dog.



Judy with Ch Vikentor's Lucky Mountaineer

2. When did you start breeding? Your goals?

Dog World had a great magazine that I read every month. All breeds had articles and there were many articles on dog shows and how to enter. Breeders also advertised wins and their records. I decided to enter a show in San Rafael, Ca. I entered and got a schedule back that told me where to go and when. So, I gave Mali a bath and off I went. When I got there, the Basenji people were friendly and jumped right in to trim whiskers and tail and get the new puppy in the ring. She got a ribbon since she was the only one in the class and I was hooked, I am a person who is either all in or don't do it. I learned tennis and basketball in high school and practiced every spare time I had. I was all in. I played on the varsity teams in high school and college and became a licensed referee for women's' basketball. I was all in. So, dog shows were my new sport and next competition.

3. What persons influenced you most strongly?

Mali was the best pet anyone could want, and I loved her for over 15 years. I bought my first male (Windy) from a breeder back east who advertised in Dog World. By then I had studied more and went to more shows but rarely won. During this time, I met more people and learned so much. I met Jeri Crandall, Margaret Sommer, the Zinners, Russell Hendren, and Melody Russell. Mary Jenkins invited me to join Mensonna Kennel Club – an all-breed dog club.



Judy showing Am. Can.Ch. Changa's Mamba Luckalot as a puppy.

I went with Windy on the Cal Oregon Circuit and continued losing. Several honest people told me he did not have proper movement. While on this circuit, I saw a beautiful red and white bitch, with 'a look at me' attitude and she was a puppy for sale. Soon after the circuit, I was the proud owner of Changa's Mamba Luckalot. Lucky was my first Champion and top five basenji the next year. Ric Byrd handled her as his first special as he was starting out to be an all-breed handler. I could not afford very many shows, but he did a great job and I helped him with little jobs learning much more.

4. What have you seen improve in Basenjis over the years?

From the beginning temperament and socialization have been very important to me and should be to every breeder. I was told when I started out that you cannot put two males or two females together- "they will kill each other." This is obviously false. Basenjis do set pecking order but how do they hunt in the Congo if they can't get along. I was also told never let them run lose, they will never return. If you take a dog that has been trained only for show and has lived in a crate or in a run all their lives, of course they will not come back- neither would I. I add to this- let them run lose only where there are no cars as Basenjis have no fear and some Think cars have other dogs in them. My dogs love to run in our beautiful National forests. It is great watching them hunt and run with all feet off the ground. I never let only one run alone as they will help each other out if there is trouble. I do not always know where they are, but they know where I am. Mine are trained to come back to the car, I even had a 6-month-old puppy get away from the pack. We went hunting for her after noticing she was not following. She had gone Back to the car and scraped the car with her paws trying to get in. Basenjis are smart.

5. What should today's breeders pay particularly close attention to?

Over the years temperaments have improved greatly. If properly socialized, they get along with other dogs, kids and even cats. I have known a few dogs that have been sold to pet people after their show career and been returned only because they knew nothing, but a crate or kennel run. This does not help the breed reputation. Pet owners are wonderful, and basenjis make great pets. They do better with an older dog in



Ric Byrd handling Am. Can. Ch. Changa's Mamba Luckalot

the household as they will learn from a dog faster than a human. We breeders need to assume a basenji will do what we teach them as they can read our minds. If we teach them something, thinking they probably won't do it – they won't.



Judy with Ch. Vikentor's Lucky Mountaineer

6. What advice do you have to a new breeder getting started?

To a new breeder getting started - learn some genetics. Don't think you can take your champion bitch to the top winning dog in the country and get a litter of champions. Learn the type of dog you like, the look you like and figure out how to breed to get it. Breeding dogs is an art and you are the artist. Learn what line breeding is and always check health and temperament. Make as many friends as you can in the breed and in other breeds. If you use a handler, one that likes and has shown basenjis is best. Basenjis show for people who like them, and they can tell. Many basenjis have been ruined by all-breed handlers who think all they have to do is run in the ring and take over the dog and it will behave. I have seen many a good dog ruined and excused because of this. Most of your BIS basenjis have been owner handled or handled by long time basenji handlers who started with them as their first breed.

7. What dogs of those you have owned or bred contributed significantly to your breeding program?

Back then there was no internet, Facebook, etc. I learned so much by being in an all-breed club and watching and reading. Mensonna Kennel Club had puppy kindergarten and handling classes. I followed The Basenji magazine to see who was winning and what type I liked. I learned to put on all breed shows and met many great people. Soon I went back to Westminster to pick up my first show male puppy. Ch Sirius Gold Rush at Vikentor was the first Basenji I finished and the sire of my first litter. Lucky and Rusher were true loves and their first litter of five were all champions. Out of this litter came the Reveille Re-Up award winner Ch Vikentor's Lucky Mountaineer. I only accepted four wives a year for Spunky with my work and show schedule. His first years at stud all his wives flew into San Francisco airport. No one on the west coast was interested in him. Arleen Peters of Darps Basenjis in Florida was a great fan and suggested the breeding that produced Mountain Mamba the first BIS tri color basenji handled by his owner Carlos Jimenez. Linda Ehlers sent him a couple of ladies from the Midwest and helped his reputation behind Jerlins Basenjis. I was very fortunate in having him as I could select a puppy from many great lines and use them in my line breeding program. Spunky is behind many Re-Up award winners and the foundation of several new lines.

8. What dogs have you seen that stand out as great examples of the breed?

I always wanted a BIS basenji. I was fortunate after over 30 years of breeding to have lived with Am, Mex, Int. Ch Vikentor's Country Rose. She was a great house dog, producer, and

example of the breed. Rose was a linebred show dog who was easy going and great to live with. She could have been any one's pet. I got her first major at Santa Barbara KC when she was six months old. She went on to win several specialties and BIS and be the number one Basenji in 1990. She was the top winning bitch in the breed for over 20 years. She was just as happy running around the lake as running around the show ring. She also won the Diane Coleman Memorial Hound Group award. I knew Diane when we were both showing bitches and was honored that Rose received this award. The dog show specials world, like the human world, prefers males as the top BB winners. After showing Rose to number 3 Basenji in 1989, I turned her over to Ken Henrichsen (a long-time basenji handler and friend) to finish out her career. I had to work to pay for it and did not have the time to take her to as many shows as necessary. It is a full-time job to take a dog to the top. It takes time, money and devotion. It was worth it – it was fun – but I won't do it again.

9. How has the dog world changed over time? How have methods of raising and selling dogs changed?

The dog world has changed a lot since I started. AKC has recognized many new breeds and added many new titles. It is possible to have fun with your dog in many ways. It still takes time, money and devotion. The internet, Facebook etc., helps you keep up and to meet new breeders across the US and in other nations. In the 80s I sent a breeding pair of champions to South Africa. At that time, it was unusual. Today it can be normal. Frozen semen has been perfected finally. The early frozen breedings rarely took. Today it is hard to get majors as fewer people are showing. Being able to communicate electronically helps find shows where there are entries. The



*Am. Mex Int. Ch. Vikentor's Country Rose winning Best in Show
Ken Henrichsen handling*

normal entry in California when I was showing was around 30, today maybe 5. The entry fees when I started were around \$10.00. Puppy matches were many and the entry was \$5.00.

10. Anything else you would like to add?

I have owned a German shepherd, 2 min pins, 3 harriers, and a red heeler over the years. I was fortunate to find Basenjis early in life and they are my breed. There seems to be a breed for everyone but finding it is sometimes hard. Showing, training, and breeding Basenjis has been a great hobby and love in my life and I hope there are many getting started in dogs who will find this the case.