

Meet Your Breeders!

Susan Coe ~ Akuaba Basenjis

Quoting from the "Foreword" comments in The Basenji - Out of Africa to You, by Susan Coe, Shirley Chambers has the following to say:

"Much thought and study had preceded her search [for a Basenji], for not only had she researched the breed in particular, but had acquired an extensive knowledge of canine structure and function, as well. It was upon that knowledge that she based her breeding program which, in the years to follow would establish Akuaba Basenjis as one of the foremost Basenji kennels in the US."

We are pleased to present this interview!

1. How did you get started in Basenjis?

Like many dog fanciers, Jon and I were not intending to go into "dogs" when we got our first basenjis. We like animals and had looked forward to having some pets so when we settled enough to purchase a house, the first acquisition was to be a pet dog. We considered both Samoyeds and basenjis but with the spring (as in "muddy") conditions, we found the cleanliness of basenjis quite superior to the look of a dirty Samoyed! As we looked closer we found the straightforward, confident, look-you-in-the-eye personality of the basenji very appealing.

We decided to get two basenjis so we would each have one to walk and as a lap ornament. One puppy was born right in Calgary sired by a local dog we particularly enjoyed meeting. There really were not many basenjis in Calgary so, silly us, for the second puppy we drove from Calgary to Logan, Utah, in the middle of winter because that is where she was. She was from the breeder who had produced the dog we admired in Calgary.

Before the puppies even came, Jon was out in our tiny backyard building a very tall fence. As it turned out the two mischief makers escaped a few times anyway. Once when they escaped, the neighbor called us at work so we could come home to capture them but when we arrived the school children who passed behind our house had already rounded them up and deposited them inside the fence.

We learned most everything about coping with basenji puppies the hard way. We learned about the devastation to personal property a bored basenji can cause. We learned about how capable they are of ignoring your every command. It was a great education and confirmed us suitable for the breed.

2. Why did you start breeding? When?

When we got our two girls in 1970 we had not thought at all about breeding or showing. We had our first house and just wanted to have our dogs to go with it. However, as fate would have it Lois Cox (Kwaheri), breeder of one of the girls, just casually said, "Why don't you try showing?" And we did give it a go. Lois did a great deal of obedience training and was known for her obedience titled basenjis then having trained the second ever UD basenji. She also encouraged us to try obedience classes. We found both classes for conformation and obedience in Calgary and became involved. Our first two girls obtained champion and companion dog (CD) titles in Canada and Lois became a good friend.

I still recommend to new owners, whether they plan to compete or just have a pet that they think about finding a good obedience class. We learned a great deal about living with basenjis through our interest in obedience. Even though training in that era was pretty stern, there was still a certain amount of dog psychology involved. I recently found a Brit show on TV where the "dog whisperer" helps people

with problem dogs. She really gets results fast by showing people how they are unknowingly teaching their dogs the wrong things. What a change in approach there has been over the years! In this modern age with more opportunities to find classes based on positive (clicker) training, working with a basenji can be fun. It doesn't need to lead to a title but it teaches newcomers how to control their dog and helps get a young dog out and socialized. Speaking of never obtaining a title our third basenji was a male named Tembo. Tembo went to classes but wasn't great at concentrating. Class graduation was during the autumn when the two girls had just been in season. Poor young Tembo spent the whole long down with his head under the ring curtain staring at the other basenji in the next ring.

Even then we were doing some pretty odd things in our endeavors to show the girls. I recall one trip home from winter shows. A snow storm had come up during the day and we returned home in very slippery conditions. Alberta is a prairie sort of state with deep river valleys cutting through it bringing runoff from the Rocky Mountains on its long trip to the ocean. At one of these coulees all traffic was being stopped by the Mounties. They were giving each driver advice on driving in snow and then letting one car at a time make a go at getting up a smooth head of steam on the down side to make a good run on the upside of the coulee. Yes, we did get home safely and that was just the first of many driving adventures encountered in those years of showing!

We also joined the local hound club when it started up and were active in lure coursing with our girls. The coursing then was just beginning; it was a straight line course like whippet racing. Sometimes they even had boxes for starting the whippets. One of our girls was really over enthusiastic and would be disqualified in this day. She hated to have dogs ahead on her on the course and I distinctly recall one day when she made a bad start and raced up the field knocking off the competition on her way to the finish line. There were no rules or titles to win at that time. It was fun with all the hound breeds, not just gazehounds participating. Those little dachshunds and beagles really got after the lure making some pretty excited noises while they did it.

As our two girls got to be of an age to breed, it seemed the natural progression from our interest in showing to have a litter. Each step we made was not a conscious decision to plan a future of over thirty years of basenji involvement! However, if we were going to breed, we wanted to do the best we could and we were always diligent in trying to do the best we could with the knowledge we had.

Purely by chance, as we had no knowledge or experience at puppy selection, we kept the best girl from that litter who we called Suni, Am. Can. Ch. Akuaba's Sungora, CD, who won several puppy groups in Canada and then, when we moved to the Seattle area, she had three group placements on the way to her American title. We have always enjoyed handling our own dogs in the show ring. We were particularly

successful when for our second litter we mated Suni to Ch. Khajah's Gay Excalibur. It was very exciting to have Veronica Tudor-Williams give two from that litter the Reserves at the large specialty in Seattle with representation from across the country. These two both became champions. Needless to say each successful step along this road led us on into more involvement.

3. What persons influenced you most strongly?

Since we had no basenji mentor in Calgary, a great deal of what we learned was from folks in other breeds and from books. We read what we could find on the breed, conformation in general and training methods. This was good in that it made us think but needless to say, we certainly were kennel blind having very few basenji examples to learn from and no one with experience to guide us. We travelled to a large specialty in California in 1972 and made contact with Bev Bland (Brushy Run) and Anne Logan (Tanda) who were helpful to us. We also had some correspondence with Veronica Tudor-Williams (of the Congo) who tried to explain breed type to us. These people certainly took abundant time to help us learn about basenjis. Finally we purchased our third basenji from Shirley Chambers (Khajah) and she became our primary mentor by letter and long distance phone calls. What a patient person she is!

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

What I have observed over 36 years is that the breed is ever evolving but in cycles. At one moment size is the big concern, then perhaps the talk is of head type and then perhaps square proportions are on the minds of many breeders, etc. When I look at old photos of basenjis, it seems like there has always been this evolving diversity in the USA. I've often felt the immense size of the USA and its relatively large basenji population and numbers of breeders with many different interpretations of the standard are the strengths of the American basenji.

Of course the potential for real change in the breed came with the newest African Foundation Stock. It would have been nice to see them more integrated into the breed at this time than has happened. Dealing with these dogs is different, not easy but should ultimately prove important to the breed.

Another interesting change in breeding has involved the internet. People are more in contact the world over than they have ever been before. Information flows quickly and experiences are shared in ways that were not possible 36 years ago. Sometimes it seems as though this improved communication has not brought basenji fanciers together. As I recall the "good old days" in the Seattle area my memory is that we appreciated the good points of everyone and tolerated the oddities more easily ending up more like a reasonable family. Perhaps that was just the naive impression of an out-of-the-loop newbie of the time.

5. What do you think today's Basenji breeders need to pay special attention to?

Having been out of the USA for a few years, I'm not too familiar with the newest trends in the breed. As always what I would pay attention to is the whole dog avoiding too much involvement in just the bits and pieces...the basic structure of the dog as well as head, coat and correct temperament. Remember to breed to the standard not be swayed by what is currently impressive and winning.

Over the years I developed a picture of the whole basenji type in my head and it includes a well-built dog as the standard describes it for

me. Keeping track of all those things and being concerned with health makes breeding an interesting puzzle and a large responsibility.

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

Patience! It seems to me that those expecting instant results and gratification are probably going to be disappointed. Joining local and national breed clubs helps put one in contact with other fanciers. Reading the breed magazines and books as well as joining internet chat groups may help. One must, of course, take what one reads in literature or on the internet with a grain of salt. We found that making home movies of our dogs really helped us. Jon's favourite movie is me running backward getting the pups to gait finishing with me falling into a hole the dogs had dug. We could watch the dog move over and over, often studying them frame by frame. It is difficult to keep track of what the feet are doing, the lines (angles) of the legs as they move, the head carriage, whether the neck has a good arch or if it just goes straight, too bluntly into the body and watching for a level topline.

A must attend is the national specialty each year where new and experienced breeders can see what is going on with others from across the country. I felt so strongly about it that I was at the first one in 1979 right on through 2002. For a number of years it was Ovide Varin, Loretta Kelley and I who had never missed then the other two couldn't make it and I was the only person who had come every time. It felt quite strange that first year I couldn't come. What a lot of dogs I saw and other breeders I learned about over those many trips. Besides a learning experience national specialties can be great fun. I remember Jane Williams meeting me at the airport in her VW Beetle and us squeezing 4 basenjis, an exercise pen, luggage, dog supplies and two people into it for the national and two all breed show in Pensacola, Florida. I remember Judge Annie Clark glaring at me and my mates at the national in Seattle as we were just having way too much loud fun ringside. Imagine that now Chuck Bagnell is a judge and surely he was the ringleader with stories in that rowdy group...what a time.

I usually suggest that one buy a male basenji to start in the breed. You're right; we didn't start with a male. What we started with were two mediocre females and had we realized we were going to breed, we certainly could have selected better breeding stock. As I said, it seems we had to learn things the hard way!

With the first pup, again, you need patience to allow the pup to grow up...not all dogs are going to be puppy champions and that is sometimes a good thing. The quick maturing pups are not always the best pups when they finally fill out at three years old. The first basenji should be the "learner" dog who one enjoys, who gets one out to meet many breeders and to learn more about the breed before obtaining the first bitch. Finding the right first bitch is by far more important for the beginner who wants to breed good dogs and a bit of knowledge can be very useful in deciding where to go for the that first bitch.

I can tell you one thing for sure: You can read every book, study every video, talk to everyone, look up old pedigrees and make proposed future pedigrees for generations but once you do take the plunge you can't expect things to turn out as you planned. Flexibility, patience and a sense of adventure is required to breed dogs. Breeding and showing dogs always seems to be some sort of balance between satisfaction, disappointment, thrills and heartbreak. One has to be able to deal with all those phases to last in any breed. ▶

7. What dogs you've seen or owned stand out as outstanding examples of the breed, and why?

It is funny how some of the dogs one saw early in their career stay in mind as the years go by. Sometimes these were dogs I only got to see in pictures (not always a dependable way to evaluate a dog) and sometimes they were dogs that I was able to see in person. Here are some old names that pop into my mind: Fula of the Congo, Ch. Tanda's Christmas Symbol, Ch. Khajah's Gay Excalibur, Ch. Phemister's Red Jacket, Ch. Black Power of Woz, Ch. Arizongo's Zeus, Ch. Kemmarob's Black Tri-Ble, Ch. Kenset Small Wonder, and Ch. Khajah's Gay Jessica. Certainly not an exhaustive or really truly illustrative sampling but those names have stayed with me over the years.

I came to own Jessica and I fondly remember dogs of my own breeding who I particularly liked but since there have been about one hundred and eighty champions bred or co-bred by me perhaps I'll pass on another listing. There are a few photos accompanying this interview of some of the basenjis we had. I will admit it is satisfying to still see the Akuaba name in pedigrees and know that people have liked what we produced.

Over the years I have liked different dogs for different reasons and I think it is wise to be able to appreciate dogs for their virtues while still being able to see their faults.

8. What do you feel are your most significant achievements with the breed?

Beyond helping a few people get started as basenji fanciers, the most significant things I did for the breed and the things that will be useful over the long term were in the form of publications. After our initial experiment with *Curly Tales and Other Basenji Nonsense*, I got more serious. In 1978 we purchased *The Basenji* publishing, editing and everything else until 2001. And to our new bold publishers, the first issue is the hardest. Things will get easier! It was a wonderful experience that I'll always treasure.

In 1979 Melody Russell (Fanfare) and I both had been pondering a lack of information on basenjis of the past. Since there was no official interest in our project, we decided to see if we could make it happen ourselves and set out to publish *The Years of the American Basenji*. It was quite an amazing experience to collect all that information. No computers then but Melody was such an excellent typist that it was difficult to find any errors in the pedigrees I proofread. My job was cropping and sizing photos and checking that the printer got the photos into the right slots. As money was tight, Melody, Charletta Jones and I hand collated that entire first edition ourselves. You might be surprised how different our collating styles were reflecting each person's personality. While the database capabilities of the internet have passed this printed version now, I am still pleased to have been able to help bring all these photos and pedigrees into a usable format.

About 1987 I was asked to author an overall breed book. A daunting endeavor but one I was excited to take up. I spent many long drives to and from shows writing this book in my head and then additional hours at the computer getting it all down. I enjoyed contacting other breeders for information and putting it all together. All and all it was a great learning experience which resulted in *The Basenji, Out of Africa to You*.

At about that same time the Avongara dogs were being brought from Africa. I was one of those people who stood back for a few years watching before becoming involved. One thing I noticed was that a

great opportunity was being missed for the breed's future by not keeping track with photos and records of these dogs. Why shouldn't we be making records of this "future in the making" while it was happening? Why wait? Why should breeders in fifty years have to scratch around for every photo and every bit of information about these foundation dogs when we could make a record available to them? Thus the idea of the African Stock Project Committee of the BCOA and the African Stock Exhibition were born. I'm pleased to have been involved with these events and to have helped to establish this historical record. I really appreciate James Johannes' inspiration and work to bring the Project to the internet. It is great that the traditions have continued and that the BCOA has continued to support them.

9. Anything else you would like to say.

Now the question I most often get is "how could you retire?" When I was in the thick of dog showing and breeding it seemed impossible that I would ever want to stop. However there came a time when it no longer seemed worth it to get up so early every show morning, when being grandma to a continuously growing extended family was becoming taxing and when I simply wanted to thoroughly enjoy a few dogs rather than spread my time over a large group. It was time to slow down and give my time over to other interests. I spent about five years reducing my basenji commitments, showing less, breeding less and found life was still good. I do miss playing with the pups and watching them grow up, but for the first time in many years I have a garden and a kitchen here in Australia that weren't primarily designed to raise puppies.

I am happy for the way I threw myself wholeheartedly into basenjis for those years. The friends I made, the people I helped, those who helped me and the fun dogs I've known will be part of my memories. Thanks for listening to my thoughts and reminisces.

10. Please include a few pictures of yourself and dogs.



Kea and Suni (Ch. Khajah's Gay Chianti x Can. Ch. Kilwinning's Akuaba, Can. CD) are the girls from our very first litter. On the left is Can. Ch. Akuaba's Kea Apsis Atim, Can. CD and on the right is Am. Can. Ch. Akuaba's Sungora, Am. CD. Suni had several Best Puppies in Show in

Canada with Jon handling and then, when we moved to the USA, she had three adult group placements on the way to her American title with Susan handling. Suni became the dam of nine champions and our first real foundation bitch.



Am. Can. Ch. Akuaba's Firefly (Ch. Luzambo's Frostfire x Ch. Khajah's Gay Maderia) was called Pie as our baby daughter pronounced Firefly. Pie was the dam of fourteen champions. Pie and Suni are the foundation bitches behind all the breeding and plans that came after.



Ch. Akuaba's Mistral (Khajah's Gay Martin x Ch. Akuaba's Sungora, CD) was our first all-breed Best in Show winner.



Ch. Khajah's Gay Jessica (Khajah's Gay Martin x Khajah's Gay Almost Angel) was one I admired and finally obtained. She was a real specialty girl with a goodly number of specialty wins including Best of Breed at the 1980 National and on to a Group One that day. The photo is with Judge Mary Nelson Stephenson giving Jessica Best in Show at the Western Gazehound Specialty in Canada. The guard at the border was quite impressed with all the trophies we brought home that day.



Ch. Akuaba the Red Fox (Ch. Pero's Krugerrand x Ch. Akuaba's Sunsprite) was a bit different type from our other dogs but we quite liked his head. Red Fox was the sire of nine champions and is the grandsire of Ch. Akuaba's Saturday Strut, CD.



Ch. Akuaba's Saturday Strut, CD (Ch. Sonbar's Celestial Kaus x Ch. Akuaba's Sunday Best O'Changa) was a Group One and BCOA National Best of Breed (1987) winner. He followed up his Specialty win two years later with a BCOA National High in Trial win to complete his CD. Freck is the sire of sixteen champions.



Ch. Akuaba's Bright N EZ Robin (Ch. Akuaba's Robin Redwood x Hatua's Star Bright) was a stud fee pup who was specialled just a few months and placed regularly in the group. Her wins included a Group One. She had one litter which produced three champions.



Ch. Akuaba's Tornado, JC (Ch. Changa's Gala Celebration x Am. Guat. Ch. Young-Kwanza Over the Rainbow) is shown taking one of five all-breed Bests in Show. The judge here is Mr. Robert Thomas. The photo inset shows Nate at about eight weeks old. Nate became the breed's top stud dog and won the Ch. Reveille Re-Up award for top stud dog of the year several times.



Ch. Akuaba in Gingham (Ch. Akuaba's Hurricane x Ch. Akuaba's Tiger Lily) was a Group One winner in her brief show career. Gingham is the dam of four champions from her only litter.



Ch. Akuaba Seeks Gold at Eldorado (Am. Swe. Ch. Akuaba the Cat's Pajamas x Avongara Nagili) is from a co-bred litter of 75% new African Foundation Stock. This breeding was done with the girls at Eldorado. Brownie is shown here at about 8 weeks old when he was all wrinkles! Brownie came with us to Australia. ♦