

Growing up with Rough Collies by Louise Bartolo

For as long as I can remember, and I have a good memory, Rough Collies have featured in my home. Collies aren't just a family pet, to us they are our life and anyone who features in our lives knows this!! The Starlenga Kennel was established some 5 years before I was born, rooted from Sandiacre, Brettonpark & Philjanco breeding, in 1979.

To me, Collies have meant a lifetime of unconditional love from an animal that knows nothing but loyalty and compassion. From our first dog Senga, who tolerated me using her as a teddy or a hobby horse to this current day, where you are welcomed and followed from the moment you wake until you put your head down to sleep!

I remember in the mid 90's, we walked our dogs in 'Rabbits Field', lots of tracks and burrows, bushes and terrain of all sorts! We took the dogs there in packs of 4, on one occasion my brother who ran ahead of my parents, fell into a deep hole, gone from sight, my parents searched frantically for him, but they didn't have to look far - Sam our blue boy (I mention him a little later) stood assertively over him, guiding them to his whereabouts and reassuring my brother that it would all be ok! Showing off some true 'Lassie' traits right there. After a few Chuckle Brother moments from my mother & father, typical Margo & Garry, David was indeed freed from the pit and Sam was hailed a hero!!

Having dogs meant we didn't do very many holidays abroad like my friends, we did weekly car journeys and stopovers! I loved nothing better than leaving the house at 9pm, the night before a dog show, the smell of the hot coffee being poured into a flask ready for the long road ahead - it was always an adventure...or some night call it a calamity!



Winning BIS Scottish Collie Open 1998 with Tanryn Blue Sonnet at Starlenga under Gill Blaikie (Kourika)

My parents were lucky that at least one out of their two children enjoyed the show scene, it was not really for my brother! The 5am wake up calls didn't go down too well, but the blow was lightened with the encouragement that there was a swimming pool at the venue, so his shorts and towel were packed and into the car he went. Only for him to discover after 3 hours in the car it was actually a lie. There was no pool nor any recreational services, only an old town hall...but now he was there he could do nothing about it!! The Art of Persuasion was used often, until he was old enough to stay behind with his friends, enjoying his childhood without the dogs each weekend.

In the early days travelling to shows we had the AA Road Map, these days I associate with being tucked up in the back seat of the car, in the dark or night trying to sleep as the adults discussed the traffic and which dogs might attend the show the following day. The late 90's brought us the internet and the AA Route Planner, this was a time where I got to sit up front, my parents didn't need to support of one another at shows, I was big enough to play that part, so one stayed to care for the dogs at home whilst I stepped up, helping to transport the dogs and the one grooming bag into the venue as well as the coffee runs back and forth to the cafeteria. I did what I was told, I felt so privileged to be a part of the Collie Community. Fast forward a few years and we had the TomTom, Sat Nav, Google Maps, whatever your preference or as it's known in our car 'shhh, shhh, shhh what did she say? What junction do it take? What exit...this one....IS IT THIS ONE?!!! Louise, get off your phone and tell me where to go!!!' This is the timing when I'm now travelling with a highly-strung mother, who won't leave home without a sat nav but also won't look or listen to it for the whole journey! We now need a cart to transport our belongings which have multiplied from one grooming bag of the 90's to 3 bags, a grooming table, a cool bag, 4 litres of Scottish water, 4 dog crates a change of clothes and a partridge in a pear tree! It's carnage at every show, but I wouldn't change it we laugh way more than we cry!!

I have met so many great people and friends through my hobby and something I am truly grateful for is having the opportunity to engage with older generations, peers of my parents age and above. Most of my friends participated in sports where they were age classified, football, gymnastics, dancing, the show world is different. Not only is the experience and knowledge of fellow exhibitors and breeders invaluable but on a personal level you learn so much about life, relationships and communication. There has been more than one occasion where my mum has picked me up before a show, not long after me getting in from a club, my friends questioning my decisions to spend the day or weekend away at a show but it's because I enjoy the company of the people there! You need to have that because no matter how great your dogs are, you won't win at every show, you might not enjoy the actual event but you should embrace the company of the people - I don't know a single show I've attended that I have not laughed hard enough to have tears running down my legs!

Growing up I was lucky enough to have multiple dogs in our home at any one time. I recall a late December morning where my dad awoke asking if I wanted to 'go get a pup?', My eyes widened and I jumped out of bed, got myself ready and off we went. My mum was at work, so I assumed she was not able to travel with us.

A few hours' drive later, we arrived at the home of long-time friend, Anne Hassock (Cammana). After a nice Yorkshire cuppa and a chat, Anne brought in a lovely blue male, it was the first merle I had owned, I was immediately in love! As it was Christmas two days later, my dad asked Anne if we could make a trip to the local shops in Redcar, so he could purchase a new shirt for the festivities, he picked out his favourite wardrobe staple, blue checked shirt from Burtons and he asked me to call my mum to tell her he was all set for dinner on the 25th. When I called her, she asked what had taken us so long getting a shirt for my dad, and if we weren't quick back from the shops our dinner would be cold! I laughed and told her I didn't think we'd make it home for dinner as we were in Redcar...she went silent. 'Redcar?! I thought you went to Burtons?!' I said yes, in Redcar and we are bringing Sam (the newly named blue) home! In true Margo style, 'you tell your dad if he thinks he's coming into this house with another f*cking dog, he can pack his bags and his new f*cking shirt and find somewhere else to keep it!!!' Then the phone went dead. I just turned to my dad, who at this point was smirking, knowing that she didn't have a clue that he'd just picked up, left for his 7-hour round trip to collect a new puppy she had no idea about! Why would you ask your wife if you could have another dog anyway?! To this day, there's still a dog that turns up without warning to one of my parents, but I'd say my mum has well and truly had her share of payback, she is now the instigator!!

A novelty to my friends, growing up with litters of puppies in your house was fun but also a thought-out and analysed process for me, even as a youngster. The International Handbooks were my bible, read from cover to cover! I used to ask my mum to quiz me on each dog, covering their name and breeding, so I could show her how much knowledge I had. She didn't really appreciate me pointing out dogs of interest to her, me holding up the book to her face as she drove on the motorway at 70mph...but that didn't stop me, I'm a little persistent like that!!



The first dog we bred who dared to make a challenge on most levels in the show ring was **Starlenga Robin Hood**. He was out of our foundation bitch Fortissat Florentine at Starlenga and by Geosan Flashback at Mallicot. At this stage, we were naming our puppies from movies, and he really did suit his name, for a small kennel like us it really did feel like he stole from the rich (the high-flyers) to give to the poor!

We were taken aback by the attention he received, although his mother won well at open show level, it was nothing like the run he took us on. On one occasion he was awarded Best Puppy in Breed and then Best Puppy in Group at a General Open Show held at Ayr Racecourse. This was the first time I'd been in the big ring and I was so proud but very nervous. The judge

Andrew Brace went over all of the group winners and picked out his Best & Reserve Best Puppy, sadly it was not my day for the top award but I had a great time...especially running around the ring behind the two winners for the lap of honour, after everyone else left the ring - it was my first time, how was I to know it wasn't still ALL ABOUT ME & MY BOY!! My mum sat at the ringside trying to get my attention and tell me to get out of the bloody ring!! We laughed all the way home about that, what an embarrassment, but a great memory!

Campaigning at our kennels first ever Crufts in 1997, at the age of 14 I handled Robbie to VHC place in a huge Special Puppy class under the late Jimmy Tait (Aberthorne). As an older puppy, he was starting to come into his own and over the next year he developed into a charming young male, making our dream come true by receiving our very first Challenge Certificate at the age of 22 months from judge Alan Clarke of Lynway Collies at 1998 Midland Collie Champ Show, going on to win Reserve Best in Show from 280 collies entered. We floated home to Scotland that day...I'm sure I remember shouting to my parents at regular intervals 'DID THAT REALLY HAPPEN???'.

Over the course of the next few years, we campaigned Robbie across the country, he gained another C.C under breed specialist Brenda Cooney (Lingwell) as well 2 Reserve C.C.'s, but there was to be no elusive 3rd ticket, he lost his love for the show-ring and like a number of collies, decided he didn't like a shiny floor! It's what we now call 'The Two Ticket Curse' at our kennel, 4 dogs on 2 tickets always shy of the crown.

At the age of 16 I took the leap and begun to judge collies for myself, again taking to the car and travelling for miles, judging only 2 or 3 classes each show 5 hours away, but I didn't care, I was participating at a new level in a sport I loved. Through the years I have judged hundreds of dogs, 2 Breed Clubs Open Shows and after completing my assessments, in 2019, I was invited to judge my very first club show at Championship level in the summer of 2021. After years in the breed, listening and learning it was an absolute honour to be asked.

As I said before, collies are my life and in 2015 after meeting my husband Darran, I decided they were also to be my work, beginning my own Dog Grooming business. I can honestly say I love what I do, I now have the flexibility to create a balanced life between my family, my hobby and profession, something not everyone can achieve. I am also lucky enough that I can include my mum in this part of my life too - although she doesn't always agree!

As we hear often, the Dog Show scene isn't what it used to be, not like the 'good old days', to a degree this is right, but as long as I can enjoy it with my family and friends, I'll frequent as many as I can, I'll look forward to the butterflies you get a few weeks before the event, the phone calls with my parents discussing the dogs and how they are looking, the hotel plans to meet with friends prior, my mum warning me not to have too much wine the night before or indeed on the day and the extensive chats about the judging in the way home...because this is our lives and all I've ever known and loved.

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