

SHOW STOPPERS

BY SUE LEMIEUX

SYLVIA HAMMARSTROM

“MASTER BREEDER”



Sylvia with Ch. Skansen's Charles de Gaulle, Ch. Skansen's American President & Swedish-born Great Dane Diplomatic Norah Jones.

Skansen Kennel was established in 1951 and has been producing top-quality, top-winning Schnauzers ever since. How did breeder Sylvia Hammarstrom get her start in purebred dogs? “My parents tell me I was keen on dogs as early as 3 years of age. At 6, I went to all my neighbors and borrowed their dogs to play with. This occurred in Sweden during WWII. At 9, I was helping breeders at dog shows, I showed my first Schnauzer at 10, winning the CC certificate. I also had a Greyhound and a Wirehaired Dachshund as a child. In 1960 I had an opportunity to go to the United States to learn handling with Jane Kamp (now Forsyth). She sponsored my U.S. entry.”

Sylvia's first mentor was Marianne Fürst-Danielson, all-breed judge and breeder of Greyhounds, Cocker, and German Shepherds under the prefix Jidjis. At age 10 she bred her first litter of Standard Schnauzers that produced two champions. Sylvia worked with the Currows' Tavey Dobermans and Borzoi. “I spent two summers with them when I was 14 and 15, then two summers with Mme Claudine de Prêt of Van Stedeke Kennel in Belgium. I showed her Standard and Miniature Schnauzers. I was lucky to have great mentors who dedicated their lives breeding the best dogs. They made me work hard cleaning, exercising, and grooming. I learned how much work is involved in taking good care of dogs.”

Sylvia attended college for two years, then decided to work with dogs. “All-Rounder Leo Wilson of England helped me connect with Jane. Handling was not my strength, but I had a chance to see the United States. I became an airlines hostess for TWA.

I loved traveling around the world and flew for 26 years! Meanwhile, I raised Schnauzers and Dobermans on my ranch in Sonoma County, California.”

Sylvia named her kennel after a famous open-air museum zoo in Stockholm. “Skansen is full of all kinds of animals. I loved to go there as a child. If you go to the World Show in Stockholm in 2008, Skansen is a must-see. I wanted to have my own Skansen in the United States.”

Breeder beginnings

Sylvia's first giant, born and raised with wolves, was Kamilla of Woolf Run. Her philosophy for breeding top-winning Schnauzers is quite successful. “The most important aspect for me is the health profile and character of my dogs; good looks and structure are part of a healthy dog. I love beautiful, well-balanced, sound dogs with proud carriage in all breeds. The perfect Giant is structurally well-balanced and has a strong gait, excellent health with tons of energy, and a dedication to his owner. In my own breed, I try to improve in each generation on health, character and beauty. With consistency, it does work, and it's satisfying to see my dogs win in shows and know my puppy buyers are proud.

“My first interest in dogs was obedience. I put more than 100 degrees on my own dogs. I think bonding between owner and dog is important. Participating in obedience, agility, tracking, schutzhund, dancing, and tricks improves communication and understanding. As I am older and busier, my dogs and I share long walks together. I am a private person, sharing my life with my dogs, my books (I read 20 to 25 books monthly), the theater and movies. There's not much time left for a social life. I have belonged to Schnauzer obedience and breed clubs, but I am not an active member.

“Twenty years ago, I wrote *The Giant Schnauzer in America*. There were no books in English about the breed. After four editions it is now sold out. It's up to the next generation to write. I write a newsletter that is popular with my puppy buyers and keep them updated on diet, training, health and other problems. We also let people know about dogs that need rescuing.”

Sylvia breeds not only the familiar black Giants but the pepper-and-salt variety as well. “The pepper-and-salt Giants are very rare worldwide and have a very small gene pool. Mr. Meulenaere of Van de Havenstadt, Belgium, trusted me with the top P/S, Faust V.D. Havenstadt, a World Champion. This incredible dog put the breed back on the map after WWII, when so many were killed. P/Ss and blacks are considered separate breeds in Europe. On the continent,



Sylvia with Int./ Am. Ch. Skansen's Russian Roulette

they cannot breed them together. I bred Faust to many excellent black females and upgraded their quality. Many have been exported to Europe where they have helped those breeders widen the gene pool. It's taking time for U.S. judges to acknowledge the P/Ss. I feel they have a great future, but it will take time."

Sylvia's secretary is currently collecting information on the more than 1,000 champions with more than 500 BIS, bred under the Skansen prefix. "Unfortunately I am a terrible record keeper so I didn't record early champions or the hundred champions in other countries. When my records are finally updated I may turn them in to the *Guinness Book of World Records* at their request. The satisfaction of improving my Giants from generation to generation is rewarding—not just seeing my dogs win, but the pleasure, love and companionship these dogs provide my puppy buyers. The complimentary letters, e-mails, and phone calls that come in daily make me get up and work hard another day. There are many thrills in the show scene; the first Best in Show, No. 1 in the breed with 52 Bests, No. 1 in many countries over the past 55 years. It is all rewarding, especially when the judges approve of my own vision of a great Giant."

Sylvia keeps about 50 adult Giants at Skansen. "Our dogs run in big open fields. I am a fanatic on letting them play and keep active. I do private research in feeding programs and follow Dr. Pottenger's research on cats in the 1930's with great success. By feeding raw meaty bones to all dogs I have eliminated thyroid problems, torn ligaments, and most cancers. It's a joy to have few vet bills. Most of the money I spend on vet bills is for health certificates on dogs being shipped. I believe this is a generational improvement just like Dr. Pottenger found in his 900 cats. Each generation is improving. I have also eliminated all vaccinations except rabies and puppy shots.

In the ring

"I enjoy dogs shows. They force me to clean up and get the youngsters to the shows to see if I'm still competitive. It's fun to spend the weekend with people of the same interest and enjoy other breeders' stock. The negative is that some judges are not well informed and don't have real dog knowledge. Luckily most judges are good and some are great. AKC needs more real dog people like Anne Rogers Clark, and Jane Forsyth. Role models I grew up with. Their skills do not come from tests and books. There are many skilled breeders and dog people who should be judging but do not because the system keeps them from applying.

Sylvia began her judging career at the urging of kennel clubs around the world. "I applied for Schnauzers and started judging specialties in Scandinavia, England, Argentina, Mexico, and Japan. I gradually added 14 Working breeds and Greyhounds to the list of breeds I judge. I hate to admit it I have become too busy and a little lazy to increase the breeds. I constantly discuss other breeds with good breeders and handlers and always learn something new. The highlight for any breeder is to judge your breed at Crufts. I truly enjoyed that honor. My most unique experience was judging in Hiroshima, Japan in pouring rain. The show field was a lake so all dogs were put up on tables and judged standing still, soaking wet, all the way to BIS."

What does the future hold for Sylvia Hammarstrom and her Skansen Giants? "I am almost 70 so definitely at the end of the road. My energy is not so high; winning is not so important. I will continue breeding as long as I am healthy and love it. Perhaps it will be longer than I think. My father died at 98 years and my mother is doing great at 96. The health profile for my dogs interests me and I try to educate my puppy buyers."

"I advise future breeders to follow their ideals and remember you don't build strong health and character on a million tests. What you see is truly what matters. Be generous with your heart, concentrate on your dreams and do not criticize everyone who disagrees with you. The United States is a big country, and there is room for many different opinions. Don't assume yours is the only right one; you will be surprised how things change in one lifetime. I'm so grateful for my life in dogs, to the wonderful people I have met, for the renewed excitement when a new generation of beautiful dogs comes to shows, for the chance to live out my dream with man's best friend, the dog."



Sue LeMieux is author of The Book of the Greyhound and is a member and past president of the Greyhound Club of America.

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