

An interview with

Maija & Bodil Arlander

CHOICE KENNEL, FINLAND

BY VICTORIA SPENCER · BESHKA AFGHANS

FINLAND has long been considered by many to produce some of the finest Afghan Hounds in the world. For the Finns, the advantage of this is enjoying the excellent quality overall, the disadvantage is competing against the same high caliber dogs in a very small space.

Finland is not a large country and to consistently rise above and beyond is not an easy task. But, Maija and Bodil Arlander have done just that with generations of their dogs. The Choice Kennel is composed of a mother and daughter team, with Maija living in Finland and Bodil, her daughter, now living in New York. Maija bought her first Afghan, Tazi Pa Chenga Grandezza, a self-masked creme, when Bodil was just a child. Bodil, at the age of eight, began handling Grandezza, completing her Finnish Championship in just two years and from there, the kennel began.



Maija & Bodil Arlander

Over the past 30 years, this kennel has bred 21 litters, with nearly 50 champions and international champions, received numerous awards as breeders of sound, high quality dogs, given a variety of exhibitor awards and remain highly respected within the Afghan Hound communities in Scandinavia, Europe and America.

The two continue today working toward their ideal of the breed, even if it is by long distance. Together, they study pedigrees, considering structure, balance and temperament, always with a careful eye on the standard.

I sat down with Maija and Bodil Arlander and asked them about their life-long work as breeders and exhibitors of their one and only breed, Afghan Hounds. Their answers were thoughtful, concise and most notably, knowledgeable. I hope that you enjoy your visit with them as much as I did.

More information, photos and history can be found on the Choice Kennel website at: www.choiceafghans.com.



Questions to Maija Arlander:

Victoria Spencer: Maija, you have been breeding and showing for many years now, what are your thoughts on the current state of the breed?

Maija Arlander: Eyesight problems during the past few years have hampered my ability to follow the developments in the breed as closely as in the past. In general, I note that it appears to me that the regional bloodlines and "types" have been diluted by imports, use of frozen semen from abroad and the desire of many breeders to experiment with new bloodlines in their breeding programs. So, whereas in the past one could easily distinguish the Scandinavian Afghans from the German Afghans, the UK Afghans and the American Afghans, the increased influence of foreign bloodlines in continental and northern Europe breeding programs has "blended" the types to a large degree.

VS: What is your impression of the American Afghan? Has that changed any throughout the years?

MA: In general, I have noticed that the American Afghans tend to be more "extreme" than the traditional Scandinavian Afghans, especially in regards to heads, both style (less or no stop) and width (much narrower), and rear angulation. It also appears to me that there are quite a few straight fronts and that ringless tails are more common than here. Clearly, some of these differences (headstyle and tail in particular) are a direct result of the differences between the AKC and FCI standards for the breed. One trait that I have always admired among the American Afghans is the attitude and carriage they seem to portray in the show ring – something that is rarely seen in our show rings. Also, I find the

elegance that many American Afghans portray appealing.

VS: What litters do you consider your best? Why?

MA: I would have to pick the litter between our foundation bitch, SF & S Ch. Tazi-Pa-Chenga Grandezza and Int. Nord. Ch. El Khyrias Diablo, which produced the legendary Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Wild West, and his sister, SF Ch. Choice West Whirlwind, a top producer. I also consider the B- and C-litters from the Wild West/SF Ch. El Khyrias Do Believe It combination excellent; it produced Int. Nord. Ch.



SF & S Ch. Tazi-Pa-Chenga Grandezza, foundation bitch.

Choice Be A Pepper and SF & S Ch. Choice Boy What A Girl, both Afghan of the Year winners, as well as Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Cosmic Copper and Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Chabot Napoleon, both top winners in Sweden. Finally, I would pick the S-litter out of West Whirlwind, sired by American import SF & S Ch. Dynasty's Thunder'n Lightenin. This litter consisted of five bitches, four of which completed their championships. It included Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Star Chaser, a great showgirl who became a tremendous producer in her own right.

VS: What traits are important to you?

MA: I place great emphasis on a good temperament, which should be one of dignity and aloofness without shyness or aggressiveness. Movement is also very important to me, as correct movement is closely correlated to correct structure and also portrays a uniqueness for the breed, ideally, when an Afghan moves, I like to see light-footed, flowing movement with a spring or elasticity that gives me the impression of the dog being almost suspended in air for a fleeting moment with each step. Other traits I value greatly are

dark and triangular eyes, good overall angulation, prominent hipbones, big feet and ringtail. Finally, as the size seems to be getting out of control with bigger and bigger Afghans being bred, I am focusing on trying to maintain the size prescribed by the standard.

VS: What would be your ideal Afghan Hound?

MA: There are many beautiful Afghans that I have come across over the years, all of whom have been excellent rep-



representatives of the breed. Among our own breedings, Wild West was quite close to my ideal of an Afghan Hound

Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Wild West



with his presence, strength and movement. He was a real personification of the "king of dogs." From other breeders, I have admired dogs such as Ch. Tifarah's High Flying Victory, Int. Nord. Ch. Rahzmundah Psidium, Int. Nord. Ch. El Khyrias Hazzafer, Ch. Casbar Sugar'n Spice and Ch. Applause Majic Cowgirl.

My daughter had the opportunity to see Ch. Coastwind Abraxas, Ch. Cani Summer Breeze and Ch. Kabik's The Challenger while they were alive, and she thought they came very close to what we consider an "ideal" Afghan Hound as well. Common traits of all these dogs, while representing several different bloodlines, are good conformation, coupled with extraordinary movement and pride.

VS: What traits do you feel are being lost?

MA: Oftentimes, today's Afghans seem to have lost the elasticity and

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springiness in the movement that we value so highly. Maybe handlers are partly at fault for focusing

too much on speed, which tends to eliminate the moment of suspension, but I suspect in most cases, it is missing to begin with. As I mentioned before, I think many Afghans are becoming too big, at least here in the Nordic countries. Straight fronts seem to be a worldwide problem. Finally, around here we see many Afghans without the protruding hipbones that are so characteristic of the breed; in some cases, they are missing due to excessive weight but more often than not, they are not prominent enough, even when the weight is lost.

VS: Are there any dogs you were not able to breed to, but would have if they had been available?

MA: Over the years, there are Afghans we admired and would have liked to incorporate in our breeding program, but distance and difficulties with artificial insemination made the proposition unrealistic. For example, Ch. Coastwind Abraxas is a dog we would have loved to use, but he died before the usage of frozen semen became a more commonplace reality.

VS: How difficult is it to place Afghan Hound puppies in Finland?

MA: The popularity and abundance of more easily-cared-for breeds in Finland presents the local breeders with the challenge of finding suitable owners willing to dedicate the required amount of time to care for an Afghan Hound's coat. Oftentimes, we are faced with situations in which the owner tires of the maintenance requirements within the first two years of getting the puppy, requiring me to find a new home. Furthermore, the difficulty in finding owners capable of showing their dog (since professional handlers are virtually non-existent in Finland)

makes finding show homes even more challenging.

VS: How many champions and International champions do you have now?

MA: Based on our latest calculations, we have 48 champions, 10 of which are International champions. We keep count of



SF Ch. El Khyrias Do Believe It, foundation bitch.

International champions separately for no other reason than that the requirements for the International championship title are so much more stringent and difficult to achieve.

VS: Are there dogs from other countries you would have liked to have seen in person?

MA: Having been quite busy with my own breeding activities and in recent years, and hamstrung by eyesight problems, I have not traveled extensively to see what other countries have to offer in the dog world. Over the years, I have had the opportunity to see many top winners in the United States (visited Afghan Hound World Congress in San Diego), the Nordic countries (many visits to Skokloster specialty, Stockholm international show, etc.) and in continental Europe (visited World Show in Bern and shows in France and Italy). Having heard my daughter rave about Coastwind Abraxas, Kabik's The Challenger, and Cani Summer Breeze, I wish I had had an opportunity to see those Afghans in person. Also, I have heard many good things about Australian Afghans and would have

liked the opportunity to visit that country to see some of their top dogs. Aust. Ch. Khandu Laser Litefoot looked wonderful in pictures and I hear he was a great

mover. What I would have found incredibly interesting is to see some of the old legends in person. I am thinking in particular of Ch. Shirkhan of Grandeur.

VS: What countries have you exported to? Have they been successful show dogs or as producers?

MA: We have exported puppies to the U.S., Estonia, Italy, Spain, Japan, Russia and Sweden. Many of the dogs have been successful both as showdogs and producers. Some of the better known exports include Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Cosmic Copper, Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Chabot Napoleon and Int Ch. Choice Souvenir. In addition, Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Be A Pepper sired a

litter in the UK, producing Ch. Izmar Tragband Finnegan, who in turn became one of the top producers in that country.

VS: What has been the influence of El Khyrias in your breeding?

MA: El Khyrias bloodlines have had a significant impact on our breeding program. First and foremost, Int. Ch. El Khyrias Diablo sired the litter that produced Wild West and his sister West Whirlwind, each of whom played an important part in the future of Choice. Then, we imported SF Ch. El Khyrias Do Believe It, who became the kennel's second foundation bitch, producing three exceptional litters for us. Interestingly, after many attempts at incorporating American bloodlines in our breeding, we decided to go back to our roots in our latest



Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Cosmic Copper



Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Be A Pepper

three litters. Our most recent one, with 12 puppies born in October 2004, incorporates El Khyrias bloodlines on both sides of the pedigree.

VS: How close would you go in line breeding?

MA: We have always been afraid to take it to the extreme; for example, we would not consider father/daughter or brother/sister breedings but we would give serious thought to cousins or like combinations if the individual dogs are healthy and exceptional in their own right. We prefer to see the same dog appear a bit further down the line in the pedigree; 3rd to 4th generation seems to be a level that we are comfortable with.

VS: Any health problems in your lines?

MA: Not any particular ones that I can think of. We've had a few males with only one testicle over the years, but it has been sporadic and in unrelated litters. We have been fortunate to avoid eye problems (juvenile cataract) or underbites.

VS: The European show rules requiring a dog to be two years old before they can gain their champion title; do you think this is a good or bad rule?

I think this is an excellent rule, as we all know how much an Afghan puppy can change over time. There are many puppies who look adorable in their puppy-coat and seem well balanced as puppies; unfortunately, as adults they sometimes look quite different and would not necessarily obtain their championships as easily, if at all.

VS: How do you think the opening of borders will affect the breed internationally?

MA: Our borders with Sweden and Russia have been problematic in recent years due to the bureaucratic requirements which make it difficult and impractical to travel there for shows or breeding purposes. Being able to import Afghans from the U.S. has become much easier over the years. Our first import had to spend four months in quarantine, which was difficult for him



Choice West Whirlwind

as well as us, while our second import came into the country after the quarantine requirements were done away with. Not sure that the opening of borders will change the breed drastically in the future, as I find the availability of frozen semen and elimination of quarantines has already had its impact.

VS: *Choice Wild West was truly a very famous dog in Scandinavia and Europe, winning Dog of the Year 1984, Most Successful Show Dog '81 and '84, Sighthound of the Year '81, '83, '84, '85, '86 and '88, Afghan of the Year '81, '83, '84, '85, '86 and '87 (at 9 years old), finally, Veteran of Veterans in 1988 and also producing very well. What made Wessu so special?*

MA: Wessu was a very unique dog in that he had great conformation, extraordinary movement, a beautiful coat AND the attitude of a king. We think it was this last trait that really set him apart. He was never the tallest dog in the ring, but the way he commanded it, there was never a question that in his own mind, he ruled it. He displayed that same presence and attitude at home, but with an air of grace and without a trace of aggressiveness. Andrew Brace, a breeder-judge from the UK, who saw Wild West both at shows and in his home environment, expressed it best when he noted, "He was one of those dogs who had an aura of greatness, wherever he was – not just in the ring." From a conformational standpoint, Wessu seemed to appeal to judges from all continents: Americans, Australians, English, Dutch, Germans, French, Italians, Swiss, and Scandinavians all held him in equally high regard. While not being too extreme, he was refined enough to capture the elegance of the breed. It is quite interesting, in fact, that if you study his pedigree, you will find that he was the result of an "out-cross" breeding and that there were influences from the U.S., the UK and Scandinavia within the first couple of generations. Maybe this was the secret to his universal appeal? What we find even more interesting is that the entire litter that he was part of was incredibly uniform in type and "look", even though it had

size variations among the individual puppies.

VS: *You have used frozen semen with your litter using Journey's Judgement Day.*



Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Star Chaser

What are your thoughts on artificial insemination?

MA: We tried artificial insemination twice using frozen semen. Both times, the results were disappointing. With JD, we only got two puppies and the second time we tried, using

frozen semen from Am. Int. Ch. Choice Hot Stuff, who was living in the States with my daughter, we got no puppies at all. My view is that it is expensive and unreliable.

VS: *Is there one female you feel produced the best for you?*

Based on the quality of the litters and the numbers of champions produced, it would be a toss up between SF Ch. El Khyrias Do Believe It (Linda) and Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Star Chaser (Sanni). Linda had two litters sired by Wild West and one litter sired by our American import SF S Ch. Pacific Pride of Stormhill. These litters produced 11 champions. Sanni had two litters, one sired by Int. Nord. Ch. Rahzmundah Psidium and the other by Int. Nord. Ch. Choice Be A Pepper. She produced 9 champions in total.

VS: *How did you choose names for your litters?*

MA: This is a difficult question. I guess it is a matter of allowing creative thought to flow freely with input from both friends and family. Sometimes, I even need to consult the dictionary to avoid misspellings. We like to keep the initial letter of names of puppies within the same litter to be the same as this

allows for easier record keeping and tracking in the future.

VS: *What are your future plans?*

MA: I am already 76 years old and have to think of myself as being somewhat retired. That said, our recent litter with 12 puppies (a record!) and my daughter's enduring interest in the breed gives me hope that the Choice tradition will continue for many years to come, even if at a slower pace and in smaller scale.

Questions to Bodil Arlander:

Victoria Spencer: *How did you come to live in the U.S.?*

Bodil Arlander: I was modeling in Paris when I got the chance to visit New York and decided that this was the first city in which I felt completely at home. As a result, I moved to New York in January of 1990 in conjunction with deciding it was time to move on with my career and

get serious. I enrolled in New York University's undergraduate business school program that very season. A year-and-a-half later, I was offered a great entry job at a very prestigious Wall Street firm and proceeded to

work my way up the ladder. Fourteen years later, I am currently a senior managing director at Bear Stearns Merchant Banking, a group that invests private equity in companies. I was fortunate enough to come by a green card through the green card lottery in 1991 and don't foresee myself leaving my new home country anytime soon. Hopefully, I will be able to continue my mother's work in the future with litters bred both in Europe as well as in this country.

VS: *What are the differences in exhibiting in Scandinavia versus the U.S.?*

BA: It is in fact quite different, in that professional handlers are virtually nonexistent in Scandinavian countries, which means that the way dogs are exhibited may not seem as "professional" to a spectator used to American standards. It also allows the dogs to compete on a more

equal basis in many respects, both in regard to the fact that the dog's owner's economic situation is less of a determinant and also in that the political influence of having a professional handler is eliminated.

Another difference that I find interesting is that until only a few years ago, crates and grooming tables were not used by ringside – rather, at outdoor shows, you'd have exhibitors pitch their tents ringside and brush their Afghans either lying down on the ground or standing on the ground. This has changed in recent years, as the influence of seeing crating and grooming on tables in the U.S. has been mimicked in Scandinavia. That reminds me of the fact that when I returned to the Finnish showings in 1982 after spending a year in the States as an exchange student and being exposed to how Afghans were showed here, I started supporting the tail in the show stance. Soon enough, that became the norm throughout the Afghan showrings.

VS: You began exhibiting Afghans as a child and just recently competed in your 20th Ironman Triathlon. Did your childhood exhibiting in the show rings help shape your competitive edge?

BA: It's probably fair to say I have been competitive by nature all my life. Obviously, being so involved in showing Afghans in Junior Handler competitions, as well as in conformation showrings, provided a natural outlet for my competitiveness. What I learned from my years showing dogs (and winning the Junior Handling Championship in 1980) was to never give up until it is officially over. That aspect of fighting to the end has helped me in my efforts within the sport of triathlon. Especially during long races like ironman competitions, giving up halfway through or keeping a competitive

mindset to the very end is oftentimes the difference between winning and losing.

VS: You showed Choice Wild West to his famous wins. What was he like to show?

BA: Unbelievable. It was as if he and I knew what we were each thinking. In a line-up, he would stay in whatever position I put him in for as long as it took for the judge to pass him and move his eyes, then, Wessu would turn his head up, look at me and say "ok, that's enough" and move his legs. It made for some interesting times for me, but he never once failed me – when it counted, he was always there for me. No one else was really able to show him; while I was in the States as an exchange student in 1981/1982, we had a friend of ours show him and it worked for a few shows before Wessu started to act up. From then on, no one other than me ever showed him.

I will never forget the last time I showed him; it was at the Veteran of Veterans show in 1988. While officially retired, this was an honorary show that he had been invited to; it was for veterans (dogs over 7 years of age) of all breeds that had exceptional track records from the prior year. It was as if he knew this was his last moment in the limelight, because he certainly rose to the occasion and won the title against stiff competition.

VS: Choice Be a Pepper was another of your kennel's most famous dogs, winning International,

Swedish, Norwegian, Nordic and Finnish Winner titles and producing two exceptional litters. You also showed him to all of his titles. Is there one particular show

that stands out in your mind with him?

BS: That would have to be the Swedish Afghan Hound Club specialty show in Skokloster with breeder-judge Anna Paton doing the dogs and the breed. It was a huge entry (more than 100), with all the big names from the Nordic countries

present, and a very exciting show. Pepe, who wasn't quite the showman his father was, had a great day and really performed to his best abilities. He could be so beautiful when he showed well; unfortunately,

he did not hit his stride until later in life when his father died and he became king of the house.

VS: You exhibited Choice Hot Stuff to his American championship in 1996. What were your experiences in showing him in the U.S.?

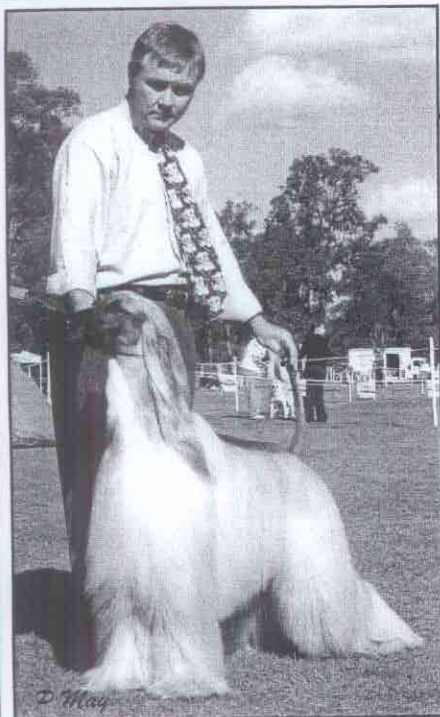
BA: Somewhat shocking and most definitely humbling. Hot Stuff had finished his International championship at a very young age and proceeded to win breed and group wins in Europe with no trouble at all. He won the breed at a big Sighthound specialty show under an American judge only a year or so before I decided to bring him to the States, so I expected him to finish his American title easily. It proved quite difficult in fact, as I felt completely out of place with him in the open class at local shows, oftentimes being relegated to the end of the line-up. I do not know if it was his long coat (he looked like he should have been finished years ago) or different type that threw off the judges I showed under, but it sure



Choice Hot Stuff



Progeny class



Multi BIS & Multi SBIS Aust. Grand Ch. Satang Never Say Never

Grand Ch. Brucehaven Dust Devil x Keywest Jeez Louise

32 Bests in Show including 3 Specialty BIS
17 Runner-up to BIS

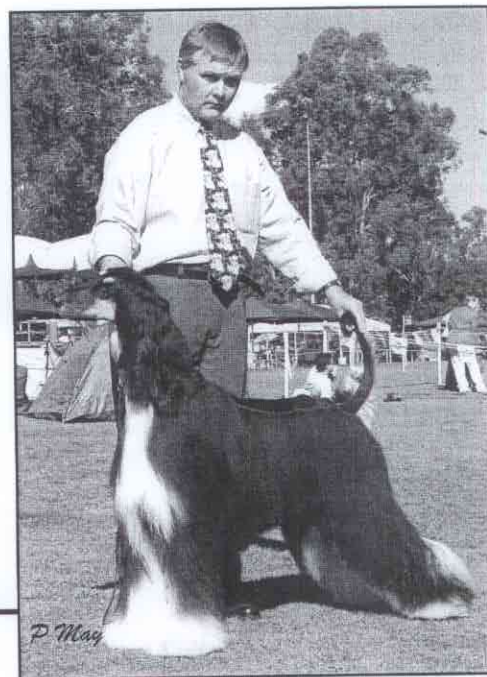
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Flyer grandson

Aust. Ch. Satang Tophat N Tails

Ch. Taejon Paralax View x Ch. Satang ForYour Victory (Aust. import)



seemed odd to me that a dog I was used to winning with was not even being considered for the top spots. Of course, it did not help that Hot Stuff was very lazy and difficult to show because of that. In the end, it was breeder-judges who appreciated him and helped me finish him by awarding us those crucial majors. The second Choice Afghan I showed in this country, Am. Ch. Choice Jet Set, made my job much easier by always carrying himself with great attitude and being very cooperative in the ring. While not as good structurally as Hot Stuff in my opinion, he completed his championship easily with three majors.

VS: How involved were you with your mother in the kennel?

BA: I have been very involved with the kennel since the very beginning. I traveled to all the shows with my mom

and even showed our first Afghan in "child and dog" competitions when I was eight years old. When I turned 12, I got my first own Afghan in Nord. Ch. Choice Gunpowder; I showed him to all his titles and won many Junior Handler competitions with him. While in Finland (until the age of 21), I pretty much showed all of our Afghans, and even after moving abroad, I continued to fly home for important shows. The funny thing was that many of the competitors used to ask "When is she leaving?" as soon as they saw me, trying to figure out what shows I planned on attending while in the country.

As for the breeding program, my mom and I have consulted with each other since the very beginning and continue to talk about what we would like to achieve and how best to do that on a regular basis. I would also like to think that I

was somewhat instrumental in helping us import dogs from the States and incorporating American bloodlines in our breeding program, albeit with limited success.

A couple of years ago, recognizing the importance of the internet and also seeing it as an opportunity to document much of what we have accomplished since we got our first Afghan in 1972, I commissioned a website for our kennel and helped pull together the results, pictures and text for it.

For several years now, I have been an official co-owner of the Choice kennel; we did this so that I can eventually continue the legacy that my mom started with the first Choice litter in 1976. While recognizing that I have got some big shoes to fill, I hope that the last 28 years spent with her will guide me in the future and help me carry forward the Choice tradition.