

A 'New Hope' for America?

The Obamas' new puppy comes from a long line of winners.

By John Schwartze

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Penny with Art and Martha Stern

Photographs by Robert HughesIt's been said that dogs are an extension of their owners – that their personalities often mirror those who care for them. But does this also hold true for a dog's name? Can it reflect an owner's attitude as well?

At a time when a pensive America waits to see what the economic future holds, hope is a feeling we need. It seems only appropriate that the registered name of President Obama's new dog is Amigo's New Hope.

A Texas Dog in the Obama White House

The now-famous Portuguese Water Dog, known as Bo, was born on Oct. 9, 2008, to Penny, a dog owned by breeders Art and Martha Stern of Boyd, Texas. The Sterns have bred Porties consistently since 1997, but never expected that one day they'd be providing the first family with one.

When Vicki Kennedy, wife of Sen. Edward Kennedy, began looking for Porties as their personal family pets, she found out about the Sterns and heard they had a stellar reputation. The Kennedys have since given a home to three Porties bred by the Sterns including Cappy, one of Bo's littermates.

"We couldn't be happier to see the joy that Bo is bringing to Malia and Sasha. We love our Portuguese Water Dogs and know that the girls – and their parents – will love theirs too," Sen. Kennedy has said.

The Road to Washington

In December of last year, Bo was first purchased by someone in the Washington, D.C., area. After about three months, the owner could no longer keep him. It was then decided he would live temporarily with a nearby foster parent who is a trainer and friend of the Sterns, and also the person responsible for referring the Kennedys to the breeders.

Vicki Kennedy found out that Bo needed a new home and called the Sterns saying she believed the Obamas would be interested in this dog. He was taken over to the White House by the foster parent in the middle of March for the initial introduction. The foster parent called the Sterns that day and told them the Obamas fell in love with Amigo's New Hope right away.

Although the Sterns knew it was a done deal in March, it wasn't released to the public until April that the Obamas' new family dog had finally arrived. The Sterns watched the announcement on television with anxious anticipation and felt honored to be the source of the presidential pup. "I've received e-mails from all over the country thanking us and saying we're now part of history," Art Stern says.

Amid the hustle and bustle of the country learning who the breeders are, the humble Art Stern believes that the media attention will be short-lived and won't negatively impact his kennel, Amigo Portuguese Water Dogs.

An Auspicious Start in the Breed

The Sterns' interest in these robust dogs began when they lived in Virginia and were watching the Westminster Kennel Club show on television in 1983. It happened to be the first year Porties were eligible for competition. Art and Martha quickly became enamored with the Portuguese Water Dog after seeing it in action, and it sparked their interest in getting one.

Not long after the seeing Westminster show, Art came across an ad in the Washington Post (arguably the first media outlet to report Bo's selection as first dog) for an available litter of Porties.

After about three hours of spending time at the owner's house trying to make up their minds which puppy to take, Art asked which was the smartest of the bunch. The breeder pointed out a 9-week-old male whose registered name was

Misty Meadow Amigo Brigao. Amigo, as he became known, was the one they decided on. "He was an incredible dog," Stern says.

The Sterns learned that Amigo's parents were champions. They also found out about the Old Dominion Kennel Club dog show in their area. The thought of competing sounded fun. "After watching that show, we were hooked," Stern says. They began competing with Amigo in obedience and conformation.

First Portie Inspires Couple

Although they didn't breed Amigo, he became the catalyst for the Sterns to begin breeding and showing a long line of champion Porties.

Today, the Sterns still compete in conformation, but primarily focus on breeding to keep their dogs interactive and spontaneous. According to Art Stern, Bo doesn't lack these qualities and has quite a few champions in his pedigree including his mother Penny (Amigo's Phor What It's Worth) and father Watson (Valkyrie Dr. Watson Is Here).

"Bo is an active dog who can deal with family and lots of activity without getting flustered," Stern says. "We believe that he's just going to be the family pet." The breeder doesn't expect the Obamas to compete with him in any canine events.

Smart Dog Needs Smart Owners

Stern describes Porties as smart, people-oriented, friendly, and intelligent enough to keep anyone on their toes.

"I've heard stories of Porties pretending to be interested in going outside so they could make their owner get up and take over the chair," Stern says. "They find creative ways to make your life interesting and are in-your-face dogs who don't like to sit around."

"They can be a challenge intellectually, and people should do their research if they're interested in owning one. They want to be with you and involved in what you're doing."

With champion blood, adaptability, and smarts to boot, it seems Bo was destined to become the family dog of the 44th president.

"When we saw Bo on television, he seemed very comfortable and so did the Obamas," Stern says. "It's awe-inspiring."

John Schwartze is the Associate Editor of DOG FANCY magazine.

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