

# Getting a life

Reflections on lessons learned living with dogs

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## Getting started

He was short, had long flowing hair, big brown eyes that plumbed the depth of your soul and he looked at you down the length of his distinguished nose.

He changed my life.

Just after we got married, my husband decided to become a 'site jock', which meant that he would be away from home most of the time. He decided I should get a dog, any dog. As long as it was a Staffie. So I got a miniature long-haired Dachshund (can't have the spouse thinking he can make ALL the family decisions – what a dreadful precedent to set so early in a marriage).



I went to Pretoria one afternoon to meet The Breeder, and was grilled about how we lived, ate and socialised. I came home sobbing, 'She's not going to let me have him.' Gavin (decisive spouse) got all head-of-house-ish on me and said, 'I'll sort it out'. He did. He can be very persuasive when necessary, my spouse. But there was a condition: we had to show the dog. Of course we said 'yes' – we wanted this little man to join our family.

And so Jacaranda Hocus Pocus came home. We called him Sigmund – a nice long German name for a nice long German dog.

Our cats were not impressed. They got over it.

Our sprinklers were destroyed. I was not impressed. I got over it.

A couple of months later we got a German-accented call: "You will be at Goldfields Kennel Club in Bedfordview on Sunday at 10am for the Teckel Club Open Show."

Clearly no option for refusal here.

So we pack up our precious bundle and off we go. On arrival we are confronted by a plethora of Dachshunds in every shape, colour and coat as well as some of the strangest looking people we've ever seen. A strange man descends on Sigmund, picks him up, shakes his legs out, plonks him on the ground like a small indignant table and starts poking, prodding and pulling at every bit of him. Sigmund gives The Man a 'look', sticks his nose in the air and freezes. Mutters of 'fabulous head, great top line, short in the upper leg, good tail set... You should have kept him!' (this last directed at The Breeder who was bearing down on us). We stand there stunned. What on earth is going on? The Man drags us off to a table and cries 'one non-member entry for Baby Puppy Dog'. Money changes hands, a piece of cardboard with a number on it is pushed my way and we're left alone again. There are people walking around with packs of Dachshunds on totally entangled leads, others grooming their dogs with all the panache of a Hollywood hair stylist, all talking non-stop. What a place.

All of a sudden there's a cry of 'Baby Puppy Dog number 31'. The Man reappears and pushes us into the ring. I freeze. Sigmund looks around quizzically. 'Around, then away and back' says the man with the clipboard. I clearly look blank. He sighs: 'Walk your dog around the ring clockwise, ending up facing the judge. Then walk in a straight line away from the judge for a few metres, then turn around and walk back.' That I can do. Sigmund not so much – he suddenly decides he can't walk on a lead and does what you can only describe as a sausage roll. I'm so embarrassed the rest of it passes in a blur and next thing I know I'm

being shepherded out of the ring. Then pushed back in a few minutes later, more walking (rolling) and all of a sudden there's a rosette being pushed in my hand. Sigmund has won Best Miniature Long-haired Puppy in Show.

We're hooked.

Lesson 1: Success breeds success.

If you want to get someone to do something, make sure they've got everything they need to succeed – skills, knowledge, resources, or in this case a really good dog. There's nothing like winning to make someone come back for more.



And come back for more we did. I joined the Kennel Union so I could get all the show schedules. We started travelling around the country on Gavin's precious monthly long weekends at home to attend shows. The Challenge Certificate Chase was on. Five CCs (as they are known) under five different judges makes your dog a champion. They don't come easily – your dog has to beat all the other non-champion dogs for a CC to be awarded. The process is repeated for the bitches and then the Best of Breed is chosen. Things get a bit competitive and occasionally out of hand.

Suddenly the car is permanently overflowing with dog crates, travelling grooming gear, towels for the dog, bedding for the dog, flasks and mugs, water bottles and clothing for every conceivable weather event. The windows get covered in nose prints. There's a subtle aroma that non-dog people flare their nostrils at. Your social life narrows to the show ring.



You meet people from all walks of life – nurses, engineers, interior designers, accountants – you name it, there was a representative. Some were interesting, some just odd. The dogs might have been groomed to perfection, but most handlers had the sartorial sense of a brick. Winter shows in the Platteland start early and it's COLD. So out come the teacosy hats, woolly ponchos and big furry boots. Summer shows could mean rain – then it's rain hats, waterproof ponchos and wellington boots.

## Getting involved

It soon became apparent that this showing malarkey requires a fair amount of admin and organisation. Before I knew what I was doing I was drafted on to a dachshund club committee.

So started my stint as Committee Member.

At first it was fun – the monthly meetings involved discussion of arcane issues like how to run KUSA shows. Each point required lengthy debate. Even if it had been debated to death during the previous meeting.

Meetings always ended with tea and cake. Lots of cake. Lots of chatting. Each meeting ran to hours. It took me a while to realise that, for many, this formed a large part of their social life (the rest of it was around the show ring).

Lesson 2: Be circumspect.

I made the fatal error of demonstrating committee competence: my portfolios multiplied. And multiplied. And multiplied. I'm still trying to extricate myself from committees nearly 20 years later – you don't enjoy events if you are always doing the organising.

In 1998 there was a schism in the dachshund fraternity. All this over weight. This is serious stuff - the ideal weight for a miniature dachshund is 5kg. Over that the dog may not win. This meant that at the peak of Sigmund's showing career, while on holiday with my parents, he was subjected to the indignity of being plonked into a washing-up bowl and on to the bathroom scale by my father to see if a morning treat of bacon was allowed. Father clearly understood the message that Weight Is Important.

Breeding dogs that weigh less than 5kg is not easy, particularly males. So a small determined group started a new Dachshund Club with a long term (and as yet unsuccessful) goal of relaxing this weight limit.

Another tenet of this new group was to educate the public. So we started holding shows at shopping centres and organising fun days aimed at getting dachshunds off the couch and out into the world.

There is nothing quite as memorable as 150 generally unsocialised dachshunds taking over a shopping centre. They tend to bark. A lot.

Dachshund owners tend to be a little, um, eccentric. Who knew that the Fancy Dress would become the most popular event at the club fun days? Dachshunds dressed as firemen, ballerinas or leather-clad bikers are not uncommon sights. I've seen more than one hot dog (dachshund encased in a French loaf) lose his costume to hungry co-competitors.

Then there's the fastest dachshund on the day:

'On your marks, get set – no, sir, the dog has to be on the ground – it 's the fastest dachshund, not the fastest owner'.

Obstacle courses where dachsies are sent literally flying over jumps or through hoops.

The prizes are insignificant – but it doesn't matter. It's fun. And everyone goes home with the best dog. You get home exhausted, deafened and swearing to never do it again. Then all the text messages and emails from people who've had just the best time ever come in and your heart swells. You're back next year.

## Getting more



Karswell Bronze Legend – a miserable apology of a dachshund, but from good lines, joined our little family a year after Sigmund. We didn't need interviewing this time as we were now officially accepted at Dachshund People and were friends with the breeder. My colleagues at the time decreed that the puppy should be named after Mrs Freud (hopelessly misunderstanding the origin of Sigmund's name), but in those pre -Google days, none of them found Martha Bernays. The next entry in the reference book was 'Freya' – the Norse goddess of love. Seemed fitting. So Freya she became.

Sigmund adored her.

She wasn't so sure. She did think Gavin was rather cool, though. She came up to his ankle and could manipulate him with a roll of her big brown eyes.

As Sigmund's tally of CCs neared the coveted five, the idea of him becoming a stud dog started to take hold. Clearly such a good representative of the breed should feed back into the gene pool. Gavin and I had discovered that we couldn't have kids (the need for wind pollination between far flung construction sites and Johannesburg wasn't helping), so we decided to start a 'fur family'.

The Doyenne was chair of one of the committees I served. She had worked as a kennel maid in one of the enormous breeding kennels in the UK in the 1940s, when kennels had hundreds of dogs, and had overseen more matings and whelpings than most of us are likely to do in four lifetimes. She was a font of knowledge and (surprisingly for the dog world) was more than generous in sharing what she knew. She guided us as we dipped our toes (and other parts of Sigmund's anatomy) into the World of Breeding.

Lesson 3: The only thing that beats experience is sharing the knowledge gained

People don't get old without learning a thing or two on the way. Take the time to get to know old folk and their interests and you'll be surprised what you learn. A throwaway comment from The Doyenne about dealing with breach births that got filed somewhere in my brain saved one of my bitches and the pup from death. ('Just grab the feet with a dry towel, dear, and pull gently under the bitch's tummy. The little bugger will just pop out and you won't rip her to pieces in the process'.) The other side of this is: we'll all be old sometime – make sure you'll be an interesting oldie that people will still want to talk to.

The Doyenne stressed that we should not mate Freya on her first season. Young bitches are not physically mature and they usually make lousy mothers. Freya didn't read this memo. During her first season at six months, she suddenly decided that Sigmund was, after all, irresistible. She screamed the house down when separated from him. So I drugged her. She got her own back by escaping from under a cage heavier than herself, scaling chairs and tables to jump out of the window to get to Sigmund while I was out. He was delighted but thankfully too inexperienced to consummate the deal. The season was spared.

The following season was consummated to the echoes of New Year fireworks under my parents' coffee table. The next season had Freya wrapping Sigmund around the security gate while in full tie (that's bum-to-bum and with him unable to escape). Definitely the photo of the year.

Freya went on to produce five litters of puppies in her time – at least three were unplanned by us. She was a fabulous whelper – she'd stand up, turn around and fart out a puppy. Then look at it in horror and abdicate as much responsibility as possible to me, the cat and Sigmund. In that order. Between of the four of us we did OK.



Lesson 4: Be careful what you name your dogs (and children, I suppose).

It turns out that the good goddess Freya was considered by some as an out-and-out whore. Seems like my Freya lived up to her name.

Without getting too technical, all domestic dogs are the same species. Centuries of selective breeding for various physical and/or mental characteristics gave rise to hundreds of different, clearly defined breeds. Some were designed for hunting, some for retrieving, some for herding; some merely to fit into women's muffs to keep their hands warm.

Even within breeds, selective breeding for certain characteristics happens. Most of this is fashion – dogs that do well in the show ring get used a lot for stud and their main features start to dominate the breed.

(An aside: Should you ever find yourself in the village of Tring in the UK, pop into the Natural History Museum and have a look at the display of over 80 breeds of domestic dogs. Once you get over your surprise, it's interesting to see how breeds have changed in 200 years.)

As we continued the newly founded Ragamuffin line, we became closet amateur geneticists. Pedigree analysis programmes were bought and decades of information painstakingly captured and analysed. Words like 'genotype' and 'phenotype' popped up in casual conversation. We started to recognise which dogs came from which lines.

Lesson 5: Take the long view of things.

We discovered some dogs had sired hundreds of puppies, effectively diluting the available gene pool. The poor exhausted little souls in question might have earned enough in stud fees for their pimps, sorry, owners to retire, but they made sensible breeding choices nearly impossible for the rest of us down the line. Always aim for quality over quantity.

We stopped breeding after a few years. We had ended up with four dachshunds, two of them Sigmund's offspring, and didn't want to fall into the same trap as some of our friends of keeping from every litter 'just in case there's a good show dog'.

We'd turned into Breeders That Interviewed ('Is your property secure? Will the puppy be alone all day? Will you take the puppy for training? How many children have you got and what are their ages?'). We found it difficult to find homes that we thought were suitable for our precious fur kids.

We'd also got fed up with inane requests:

'I want a brown girl worsie dog.'

'Sorry, I don't have puppies right now.'

'But it says in this magazine that you are a breeder.'

'I am a registered breeder but we only have one litter a year.'

'But I want one by the weekend – it's for my daughter's birthday.'

'I tell you what, let me check the freezer – there might be one left over from the last litter that didn't sell.'  
(That usually got the phone slammed down.)

The people behind calls like this are the reason puppy farmers exist. But that's a hobby horse for another time and place.

Around this time Gavin decided that I needed more protection than a carpet of snarling sausages. So after due consideration Bouvier des Flandres Zabush Fatman Smudge joined us. He arrived as a 7-week old bundle of grey fluffy fur the size of our cat.

The dachsies were NOT impressed.

They ignored him for weeks.

Then Fidget (another one of those poorly considered names) condescended to interact – by pulling Smudge’s burgeoning beard. A bond was formed (and his undershot jaw got sorted out – but that might have been coincidental).

Smudge had a disproportionately large nose – we were terrified he would grow into it. As it turned out he ended up around 70cm tall and weighing in at 55kg. He was A Large Dog. Or a donkey, according to my mother. He, however, was convinced he was the same as his 20cm tall, 5kg pack mates. Poor confused boy.

Smudge took his role as my protector very, very seriously, and this defined our relationship. He would ease himself between me and anyone who he felt was not ‘quite right’ and subtly herd them away (Bouvier’s are physical herding dogs). For a long time this included Gavin – serves him right for leaving me alone so much.

Once the last of our four dachshunds became a Breed Champion like her father, we stopped showing. A spate of deaths, suicides and emigrations had eroded our little showing clique. The New Order was much more aggressively competitive. It wasn’t fun anymore.

I’d started working with my dogs and that was proving to be much more rewarding.

## Getting disciplined

The fateful day of that first show, The Man told us we needed to go to Show Training (blank look). A series of serendipitous conversations lead Sigmund and me to The Trainer one Saturday afternoon. We joined a varied group of beautifully groomed and (to us) beautifully behaved dogs. The cryptic ‘away and back’ and ‘triangle’ manoeuvres were demystified and after the hour The Trainer came up to me:

‘Your dog needs socialising – come back tomorrow and join the Puppy Class.’

‘But Sigmund’s not a puppy any more – he’s 8 months old.’

‘Not negotiable – be here tomorrow or don’t come back.’

The Trainer is phenomenal with dogs – not that good with people.

So back I went (I was biddable in those days). We graduated from Puppy Class 10 weeks later.

Lesson 6: Be interesting to your dog.

Dogs do things that give them gratification. If you aren’t interesting, they’ll go off and find something or someone that is. Even in those early days of traditional (coercive) training, this was true.

A case in point:

I take Sigmund to Emmarentia Dam for a walk. I’ve been training my dog – I know he’ll come when I call! So I take him off lead. Oops. He’s gone. He might be little, but he can move a LOT faster than me. The Trainer has taught us you never chase your dog – it just makes them run faster. So I saunter up the hill after him, pretending not to panic. I spot him – under a bush with (oh, yuck) a dead bird. Which is clearly MUCH more interesting than me. He is, however, watching my progress.

What else can I do but fling myself to the ground, writhe around enticingly and pretend to cry.

We watch each other out of the corner of our eyes.

Success – Sigmund inches out from under the bush (still with bird in mouth). I cry more. I sob. I beat my chest. He inches more, chewing thoughtfully. Rinse and repeat.

Sigmund eventually decides I 'm interesting (or , more likely, he finishes the tasty part of the bird) and rushes up to me with a concerned expression. I snatch him up for a dead-bird-smelling cuddle and re-tether him.

I invest in a long lead. He seldom goes off it. Our walks are much less stressful.

Dachshunds were designed to hunt in packs, following their noses to find badgers, go to ground (follow the badger into his den) and bark loud enough for the huntsman to hear. These traits (a tendency to go away from their handler, digging and barking) are the main reason that hundreds of dachshunds have to be rehomed every year. They are NOT cushy little lap dogs despite their size.

These endearing traits also meant that dachshunds were generally considered untrainable and not many dog schools would take them into class. It doesn't help that they are generally stubborn, feisty little sods who end up fighting with larger dogs by virtue of being annoying. I was lucky: The Trainer allowed me to join whatever class I could get to, so Sigmund and I worked with all kinds of dogs – from German Shepherds to Staffies – and at all kinds of levels.

Lesson 7: Accept every opportunity to learn.

Sigmund became (in show parlance) bomb proof – he was scared of nothing. I soaked up everything around me. The books on dog breeding were joined by ones on canine behaviour and training. I became boring in another field of dogdom.

My persistence paid dividends and another whole new world opened up:

'Would you like to do something different with Sigmund?' asked The Trainer one afternoon.

'Sure,' I replied.

'You're coming to Durban as part of the carting display for WODAC.'

The World of Dogs and Cats exhibition had been held for the first time the previous year and The Trainer had taken an obedience drill team and a carting display team down to perform. The rest of us lesser mortals were in awe of this group. And now we were being invited into the inner circle! My pride in my little man knew no bounds.

Small snag: clearly I know nothing about carting, so I was sent to She who became The Mentor – a respected competitor in various disciplines with years of experience. Out comes a Sigmund-sized red cart, complete with harness.

'We'll harness him, hitch up, attach the traces and get him used to the cart, then we'll start the manoeuvring.'

Huh?



Sigmund, being a stalwart little fellow, allowed all this to happen without blinking an eye. In a matter of days he was pulling the cart as though born to be a draught animal. For very small loads, you understand.

So off to Durban we went, and hooked on carting I became. I competed with three of the dachshunds with varying degrees of success, and managed to get Smudge to champion status. The stumbling block for him was the three minute out-of-sight stay.

‘Wait here, boy.’

‘Mom – don’t leave me. I don’t like it when I can’t see you.’

‘I’ll be back, I promise.’

‘Sigh.’ (Bouvier sigh a lot.)

Three minutes pass. I return.

‘Smudge, why are you two meters ahead of where I left you?’

‘I could see you from here. I couldn’t where you left me. How can I look after you if I don’t know where you are?’

‘Sigh.’ (Humans can sigh a lot too.)

The Trainer introduced us to the concept of demos, and together we put together a dachshund demo team of 12 dogs that proved the training world wrong – these little dogs CAN be trained. Most people are confounded by the idea that a dachshund can just walk calmly on lead – watching our little group doing stays, retrieves and other technical stuff seemed to blow people away. We even went as far as challenging a team of other small dogs to a relay race one year at WODAC (the dachsies won!)



The Mentor took me under her wing – she’d had Bouviers for years and knew how to train these opinionated beasts. We started doing fun stuff – tracking, scent work, agility. Her steady guidance meant that Smudge was invited on to the WODAC obedience team before he was 4. He did so well he became



Team Head Honcho Dog #2 the following year.

Training for WODAC brought The Muse into my life. Another highly experienced competitor, she seemed to get her motley pack of dogs to do the most amazing things. Working with her in class was hilarious – she was always so focused on her dogs that she inevitably went in the opposite direction to the rest of us. I would watch and try to absorb everything so I could be even a bit like her. I eventually gave up on that dream (not committed enough) and she has become one of my closest friends instead.

Lesson 8: You get what you give.

If you want a dog that gives you a life of dedication and devotion, give him that back. Smudge was my constant companion for 13 years and our bond was incredibly special. It takes time and work to get there, but the rewards are without bound. In the words of The Muse: “ You can't train for everything in life, but you can build a relationship and mutual understanding that is strong enough to get you through totally new challenges when need be. ”

The Mentor introduced us to training using positive reinforcement – play training. Smudge would move the earth for the opportunity to chase his blue ball.

The Muse introduced me to clicker training – using operant conditioning as a training tool. In a nutshell, the desired behaviour is marked ('click') and rewarded – usually with food. It opens up a communication channel that traditional training can't even imagine. The first 'trick' The Muse taught Smudge and me was a retrieve. In the past our retrieve exercises went something like this:

The Trainer: 'Throw your article.'

Handlers and dogs (including Smudge) rush to the furthest edges of the field as my dumbbell soars heavenwards and in completely the wrong direction. (The dumbbell weighs 1kg; it hurts when it hits you. We found this out the hard way.) Scrap exercise, administer first aid as required.

The Muse showed me how to clicker train the exercise from the end: holding the dumbbell is safe. Bringing the dumbbell from a distance is safe.

The Mentor drilled me in throwing the dumbbell until that was safe.

And lo! We had a retrieve. OK, it was a bit more complicated than that, but you get the idea.

Lesson 9: Positive reinforcement works.

You want somebody to do something for you? Ask nicely. You want them to repeat the behaviour? Thank them. It really is that simple. It works for dogs and it works for people. Try it.

The Muse always did a segment of canine freestyle during the WODAC team display. That's choreographed tricks and moves to music (or dog dancing if you prefer). She made it look effortless and the most fun you could have with your dog. Her dogs obviously loved it.

Next thing I know I 'm 'doing' dog dancing. Smudge and I are about as co-ordinated as bricks. But we battle on and come up with a routine that we enter into a live competition. Oh dear.

'We're up, boy. When the music starts, go out across the ring like we've practised and I 'll join you shortly.'

'Not a chance – you 're obviously terrified. I'm NOT leaving you.'

'Please!!! Half the music's finished and we haven't moved yet. People look like they are going to start booing.'

'No. You need looking after. I 'm staying here with you.'

'Sigh.'

We never were good at competing.

People seem to expect more from big dogs – crowds roar with appreciation when little dogs do ANYTHING that looks like it might have been on command. Performing with Fidget was always exciting: you never knew how much of her routine she would condescend to do. I often ended up doing most of it myself. But present a crowd with a large dog staring fixed and unmoving at his gibbering wreck of a handler and they just don't get the waves of love and support coming from the dog. They can be quite brutal, in fact.

By now I 'd realised that I could be of more use elsewhere in dog sports.

Lesson 10: No judges, no shows.

The whole point about competitive dog sports is that you are assessed. So you need a judge. It's a schlep to become a judge, and if there aren't many judges, you get to compete less and less.

So I qualified as a judge in both carting and canine freestyle. The reduced competing time suited me just fine, and I accepted invitations to judge all over the place: from Kempton Park to Cape Town, from Natal to the Netherlands.

The Muse and I started giving dog dancing workshops all over the country. It turns out I 'm one of those 'if you can't do, teach' kind of people. Suddenly other people refer to me as a Trainer. Gulp – how did that happen?

I realised that my own dogs were losing out – I never seemed to have the time to work with them. So when an opportunity arose to start a small training group, I helped make it happen. The Pink Clique was born (we all like pink wine, we practise clicker training and we're a small group). We set ourselves challenges and work through them together. We have fun – and so do our dogs – and new friendships have been forged.

Lesson 11: You can teach an old dog new tricks.

When Smudge was 12, with the help of The Pink Clique, he learnt the 15 tricks necessary for him to get his Novice Trick Dog title. Not bad for an old, deaf, blind dog.



When you spend over a decade living and working with a dog you end up like an old married couple. Particularly if you work from home like I do - I spend more time with my dogs than I do with Gavin. They bring me joy and frustration. They have stretched me mentally and physically. They've taken me places I would never have gone to without them. I might have become a dog bore in the process, but it's been a fun ride.

There is a downside: the tragedy of living with dogs is that you outlive them (usually). I lost my beloved Smudge during the writing of this story. He was one

week short of his 13 birthday – a massive age for a large breed dog. I was blessed to have him with me for so long.

Dog people tend to collect quotes, and this one seemed appropriate:

*"It came to me that every time I lose a dog they take a piece of my heart with them. And every new dog who comes into my life, gifts me with a piece of their heart. If I live long enough, all the components of my heart will be dog, and I will become as generous and loving as they are."*

Author unknown

Smudge took a huge piece of my heart with him. He was my friend, my companion, my protector. His usually badly-groomed coat absorbed years of tears and laughter. He taught me more than I ever taught him. I am bereft.

But I am not alone. My two remaining dogs, Mouse (a young Bouvier bitch) and Oliver (a middle- aged miniature long-haired dachshund) have given me pieces of their hearts I 'm looking forward to the lessons they've got to teach me.