

13 MONTHS 16 DAYS:AN IMPROBABLE JOURNEY

By Chuck Turner

*The following story is a diary of my experience showing my Irish Water Spaniel named D'Locks Look to Windward.
We call him Dublin.*

The thunderstorms barreled through the Baltimore Washington airport just as Delta's flight from Minneapolis was on approach. The pilot scraped his landing and nosed up to circle while the storms rumbled through. I watched this little drama from the Delta cargo building. It would be another hour until the precious cargo I was waiting for would arrive. My life was about to change. It was July 29.

Two months earlier our companion of 13 years, a Standard Poodle, had left us. We, my wife and I, were in a state of grief. Our poodle had gone everywhere with us. He sat under the Starbucks Coffee table; gamely heeled down the busiest of sidewalks and was a quiet joy around the house. Eventually time began to heal our wounds and I began to long for a new companion. The house was too quiet. Not for long...

Outside the airport terminal on a small patch of rain-soaked grass, I opened a small crate and out scrambled a bundle of brown furry energy, nine weeks old. Our first Irish Water Spaniel entered our lives. We named him Dublin but his registered name is D'Locks Look to Windward; a big handle for a small creature. He is a pup from the mating of Charlie Brown (Ch. Stanegate Slippery When Wet) and Luna, (G.Ch. D'Locks Lunar Eclipse) a bitch owned by Lynn Musgrave, Grattan Foy, and Enzo Marfella.

Dublin was darling. Away from his littermates for the first time, he only whimpered a bit the first night he spent with us. I know, because I was sleeping on the floor next to the crate. House training? A breeze. Summer flew by, each getting to know the other, and by September Dublin was ready to travel so I took him up to the Wine Country dog shows. Years ago I had shown in the conformation ring; been there, done that – and not so well. I swore that I was not going back there. But I wanted to meet others in the breed, make new friends, and contemplate Dublin's future so we headed up to the Finger Lakes to watch the obedience and conformation rings.

After Wine County it was time to start training so Dublin and I entered in puppy kindergarten. We were amongst a very diverse group of students: A Bernese Mountain Dog, a Nova Scotia Duck Tolling Retriever, a Rhodesian Ridgeback, Standard Poodle, Polish Sheep Dog, my Irish Water Spaniel ...and then there was "Annie", the perfect Golden Retriever. She was sweet, pretty, perky and perfect. Annie actually paid attention in class, understood the instructor without interpretation from her owner and was the first to be volunteered to show the rest of us how the assignment was to be done. And there was "Cooper" the Bernese. Oh man, ole Coop was cool. He lumbered around and quickly mastered the "sit" command, mainly because he really didn't like moving very much anyway. And the Standard Poodle, "Cole." He always "got it." The kind of kid that was very athletic, real good looking and smart.

And then there was my Dublin. His philosophy was “why pay attention to all this boring talk when there are potential fun times in the room?” While everyone else was intently listening for the next instruction, my boy’s eyes were darting across the vast Armory floor trying to make eye contact with a potential live wire. Surely someone wants to blow this gig and go play!

October. We are practicing heeling, down, sit, stay. Dublin is a challenge. I try to stay cool and collected. He looks for mischief. He is smart but willful and he exhausts me, the instructor – and even perfect Annie. After class I head home for a stiff drink and mull over my situation: I’ve got this assertive, active outgoing Irish Water Spaniel. He is strong. He thinks he is smarter than me. (“...well,” says my wife.) I realize this is going to be tougher than I thought...

After eight weeks, we got a diploma; which he ate; honestly.

Still, I was proud of how far we had come. In class Dublin was getting it. Communication was clicking at last. At home however, he was still a rogue, a clown, a thief. Anything that could be found went into the mouth and once clinched between teeth it was a run to hide. Our game had begun. We learned to keep the house picked up. He learned to knock closet doors until they magically opened, revealing treasures ripe for taking. Nothing was safe or sacred. It was quickly dawning on me that I had a young Irish Water Spaniel and not a mature Standard Poodle. To stave off despair I squinted around his rough edges and told myself there was a bright, fun filled future waiting for us. Sure, the puppy was impossible and he was straining the household ...but there was cuteness about it. My wife didn’t see that side; especially when the first sofa pillow became a lump of feathers.



November. A holy terror was developing under the curls. He was overly enthusiastic... Okay, he was wild. He jumped on everything. On lead he pulled me off my feet. He chewed anything that would fit into his mouth. He had the attention of a gnat on speed. I needed help. I interviewed a couple of trainers and we started serious one-on-one training. That lasted just two weeks until his “enthusiasm” wore us all out – the trainer, my wife, me. All of us, that is, except Dublin who was just getting warmed up. I decided we all needed a break and, feeling somewhat defeated, I made Dub stay with the trainer for a while. Our house was quiet. We left clothes on the floor and napkins on the table. Bliss! Twice a week I went to work with Dublin, apprehensive at first, but soon I liked what I saw. It was important not to break the boy’s spirit, the trainer said. The unfettered energy underneath the curls of terror would one day be called “drive.” Buoyed with this insight, I saw his “enthusiasm” in a different light. And after all these months a bond was being forged between us. Perhaps a saner man would have stopped here, but I was now getting advice from new IWS friends. They were impressed with how nicely he was developing. Not only that, they said, he was turning out to be a beautiful specimen of the breed.

After all we had been through I ate up this affirmation like candy. “If I wanted to show him in the conformation ring” one of the IWS friends told me with a gleam, “you two might do well.” The show bug made its first bite.

January. It is the dead of winter. Despite the cold, Dub and I practice “stand-stay” in the yard and mimic the drill of the conformation ring. Twice a day, every day. He doesn’t get “stand-stay” and thinks the words “let’s go” mean “I-can-run- faster- than-you!” I want to give up. I don’t. When the snow comes, we move to a parking lot.

Needing outside assistance we headed to conformation class boot camp. That was another nightmare. Picture my rogue Irishman in a ring with 20 well behaved show dogs. His response to going around in a circle was to go directly *across* the ring and intercept the lead dog for some playtime. I was moving forward and he was moving diagonally; that wasn’t going to work. One more attempt the following week, I decided, and if it wasn’t better I was done.

That next week he was still misbehaving when one of the trainers took me and Dub across the room, alone. She grabbed his collar, gave him a shake and told him, “stand-stay!” I am talking Army drill sergeant stuff. Scared both of us to death. I swear she would have killed him if he hadn’t stood and he must have thought the same thing. He stood for a good ten seconds. Progress, but we had a long way to go before we were ready for a real, live dog show.

I am 61. I was raised in New York State and our family dabbled at breeding and showing dachshunds. When I was 13 I had the good fortune to meet one of the stalwarts in the dog world. Mrs. Charles Stalter took a liking to me and generously gave me a black and tan smooth dachshund pup that had just won the Puppy Sweepstakes in NYC. She thought “we looked good together.” Her handler showed me how to show the dog and off my father and I tromped to the local shows. I showed in breed and junior handler classes, always under the watchful, helpful eyes of Mrs. Stalter and the hopeful eyes of my dad. I never finished a dog. We really weren’t that good. I was a kid showing against “real” dog people.

Despite the lack of success, showing a dog has always been something I secretly wanted to do again but raising a family and building my career kept putting off the dream. Now the kids are grown; my career is still on track and I have the commodity of time. My private hope was to get a championship title on a dog for my father; for all the time he invested in taking me to shows and encouraging me on, despite defeat. He loved breeding and showing livestock, something he learned in 4-H growing up on a dairy farm during the depression. Maybe, I mused, this was my time and this was the dog. Dublin, the wild child, was my only shot at a comeback.

What I was thinking? Me, back in the ring was one thing, and unlikely enough. But with an IWS puppy it is a whole other dimension. But as they say, you can’t enjoy the pool without getting wet. I decided to jump in.

Spring. I have found a couple of sanctioned matches close by. I have a target. Dub and I keep working. Correction: I keep working and he keeps playing. I watch the calendar. “Stand-Stay” is getting a little

better. “Let’s go” still means “time to party!” We keep practicing. At night I wonder if I have lost my mind.

Finally, the day came. Show time! I loaded the car and left for the match. Paid my money, got an arm band (had to look around to see which arm it went on) and in the ring we go. Those first matches, he acted just like everyone would expect of an IWS puppy. He went every direction but straight ahead and pulled away from the judge when he came to evaluate. With legs and arms akimbo, the two of us were a sight that would make you laugh or cry. By the end of the day I was on the verge of throwing in the towel. But we stumbled on. Persistent. Just like my dad used to tell me.

Sometimes, when hope is running out, a single person can step in to change the emotional tide. At that moment Jim Rubin was the cheerleader we needed. Quitting, he said, was not an option. In fact, he suggested that I *further* unravel myself by entering the Maryland Sporting Dog show in March. This is the big league. In a moment of optimism, fueled by Jim’s enthusiasm, I entered. Turns out, entering is a breeze... but then reality takes over. Three days before the show, panicked, I tell Jim I am not going. Dub is not ready; he will be excused, we will be laughing stocks. Again, Jim dissuaded me from my own pessimism and off we trucked.

Disaster. Day one in Maryland we were number 2 out of 2. And the judge was kind at that! We weren’t, however, excused. Maybe this is a sign, I wondered, trying to find hope in the failure. Dede Selph took pity on us and asked if I wanted advice. I did! And she gave it: “Keep your hands still,” she said. “Keep them on your side of the dog. Be steady. He will follow.” She was wonderful. I adored her encouragement and still do. She was another cheerleader, just when I needed one. I was starting to see that many faces in the IWS crowd were not laughing at me – they were cheering for me!



Day two. Before ring time, other IWS owners jump in to help me groom. I was flabbergasted that they gave up time to help me; the new kid on the block. Beautifully groomed, my tie knotted, number on my arm, in we go... Dublin pulls me into the ring but, miraculously, he behaved, enough, for a minute. And now I was aware of something else; something new: I wanted to win. Putting us through our paces, the judge took a long time with us. Finally, she told us we had very nice puppies and it was a hard decision to make. Then she said, “but today this is the one I am awarding.” She was pointing at me!

If failure is an anchor, victory is the wind in your sails. Suddenly, it was Game On!

I was bitten. We headed to Baltimore for three shows there. They started disastrously and, for the first time, I was aware that the disaster was *me*. I was nervous, scared, and tense. Sweat projected from every pore of my body. I had minimum experience; minimum handling skills and a puppy that still thinks misbehaving is behaving. Enter Midge and Bunny, unlikely heroines. They were a collective Superman; I played the role of damsel in distress. In a quintessential newbie move, I had innocently set

up my grooming/waiting station in an area reserved for Bouviers. "Doesn't look like a Bouvier to me" Midge uttered from behind me, teaching me the ways of the shows. Technically, the area was reserved but Midge relented and permitted me to set up. A friendship was born. After my classes Midge took one look at the disheveled me and took pity: "You need help. See me later." When the judging was completed for the day, Midge walked me into a ring to practice. "Don't let your lead dangle," she advised, showing me the way "real" handlers gather up the lead. "When you stack him, work his judge-side first, and go slow. Firm but gentle, fast but not rushed or you will startle him." "Take your time to prepare before you track out and back; a circle first is okay." "Breathe. Your dog will feel it and relax with you." "Get the lead up under his chin; control his head and you control the dog." On and on... She was a life preserver when I was about to drown. I owe a lot to Midge and her friend Bunny who have since then followed us every step of the way and reached out every way possible. We may have an IWS convert!

I was starting to realize I wasn't alone in all this. Jim Rubin, Lynn Musgrave, Gratton Foy, Missy McMunn, Dede Selph and others, too many to name, have given their advice (so did a judge in the ring, which shows how needy I must have seemed.) More important, they gave me their support. It is a competition, yes, but where else do you find competitors willing to drop everything to sincerely help a newbie? They got me to laugh at myself, focus on the dog, remember his age and cut him slack. When I was a wreck someone observed, "Dublin is looking to you for your leadership and he gets confused when you are so nervous. You are letting him down." Easier said than done; but it got to my head. I would have quit back in Maryland if I had not received such kind, encouraging comments.

The climb toward a Champion title involves earning points, which you get by beating people. Going into the last day of the Baltimore circuit I realized that even with my uncertain leadership I had started to earn some points. Miraculously, - fool heartedly? - I was starting to believe in myself. My own personal Rubicon happened there in Baltimore on the final day. Dublin, my bad boy, curly haired incorrigible thief... with me, Chuck Turner, a 61 year old newbie at the other end of the lead... took Best of Breed! Anxiety kept me from going to the Group ring but new friend Midge insisted and took him in the group ring herself. I watched from the sidelines completely awed at the control she exerted over my dog. Suddenly, under a knowledgeable hand, I could see what others had admired about Dub from the beginning. Most importantly, watching him compete against the other breed winners, I was proud of Dublin. I knew that I needed to put the pieces together. I needed to focus on my behavior, stress levels, use of hands etc. By the end of the Baltimore shows, unexpectedly, he had five points.

Next in line were the four New Castle shows. Mentally I might have been ready but I had knee surgery a week before. I was under doctors' orders not to get in the ring so Midge took the lead. On day one Dub was second in the 12 to 18 month class. On day two he took Best of Breed; 5 more points! Suddenly this guy had 10 points! Wanting to get serious, I had retained a professional handler for the next two days. IF a miracle happened again, Dub would get five points in those two days and finish, earning his championship! That night was fitful. Perhaps it was adrenaline, or sleep deprivation, but I deliberated all night whether to show him myself. On one hand, I had promised my doc and my wife I wouldn't be so reckless with my repaired knee. But, on the other hand, was ...was what? A dream? A death wish?

A challenge? By dawn, all I knew was that if a miracle was going to happen that day, I just had to be on the other end of the lead.

In the morning, sleep deprived, I gave the professional handler his check and explained the situation. The handler agreed to come to ringside in case I fell. Again, I relied on IWS friends (thanks Rick Mulkearn for picking a tie to get me suitable for the ring.) And suddenly, it was show time. I took a breath. We entered the ring against six other Irish Water Spaniels, a healthy class. Dublin moved with grace. He stacked for the judge with precision. My knee hurt but the discomfort vanished when the judge looked at his line up, pondered the choices... and pointed to us: "Best of Breed". Five more points! D 'Lock's Look to Windward was officially a champion! The thrill, rush and exuberance of the moment had me floating. My IWS friends clapped, hugged and cheered! I took a measure of pride in our accomplishment; all the sweeter for the difficult road we traveled. I looked skyward for a brief moment. Thanks dad. The five hour drive home was pure exhilaration. My wife was very happy for our accomplishment and asked if becoming an AKC Champion meant that he wouldn't continue to steal tea towels and napkins? Fair question; back to Earth.

I believe that once you've stood on the peak of a mountain that was once too high to conquer, it is difficult to stop looking up at taller ones. And dreaming. After getting our Champion title, what else? Answer: Grand Championship. It requires 25 more points, three majors and the dog must beat a minimum of three other champions. And so, this story progresses: six more shows in Massachusetts and Maryland; points are quickly accumulating. Show after show; Dub seems to be enjoying himself. I am getting my groove on. All those days of practice, day in and day out, all the advice from friends... It was working, finally. More cities... more shows... more points... and suddenly in our sights, not too high above us, was El Capitan: A Grand Championship title.

June. The West Friendship Cluster. Dublin has won Best of Breed on the first three days. The murmur at the show, amazingly, is that he and I are poised to get a Grand Championship with just one more win. He would be one of the youngest dogs ever to reach this goal. Needless to say, I have another sleepless night. This streak has to end, I think. We've had a lucky run. All good things come to an end. Don't hope too much... On the other hand... just maybe?

Sunday arrives, it is scorching hot. To make matters worse, Dub's nose is beginning to connect with hormones and he is noticing the pretty bitches. I have him on the grooming table and all he cares about is that evidently-sweet smelling Afghan bitch a few tables away. His head turns every time she moves. I know that in a matter of moments, depending on hormones or the direction of the breeze, his mind is going to be completely lost to me and we will be back at square one. I put a dab of mentholated rub on his nose - a known dog show solution. And then, thinking of anything, I put an iced, wet towel on his scrotum. I have no idea what I am doing ...

Ten minutes later we go into the ring. The judge, Larry Sinclair, is examining Dublin and looks up smiling and says, "nice dog, even with a wet, icy cold scrotum." I say, "I'm sorry judge, there are some girls in season and I was trying anything to cool him down." One isn't supposed to talk to the judge. I know I

should stop but nerves have unleashed my tongue and suddenly I hear myself saying, “Don’t know if it helped or not; never tried it on myself.” Judge starts a controlled laugh. My heart misses a beat. I know I have lost because of my stupidity.

Off we go, Dublin and me. All those months of advice and training come to focus. I take my time. I take the courtesy circle. I gather my lead just so. I breathe. Down and back. I make sure to look ahead and not down at Dub. I feel him at my side, this incorrigible rogue, now a young male entering his prime. I feel him floating. I make sure to head Dublin, and not me, into the judge’s line of sight on the return. We free stack and I look at my boy as he looks up at me. Now we are one last circle from the end. Around we go, this large class of beautiful specimens of an old and rare Irish breed. Ahead of me, and behind, are handlers with hopes as high as my own. Judge examines the class for the final time. He points at his winner. He is pointing at us. Frozen scrotum and all, Dublin gets Best of Breed!

At just 13 months, 16 days old Dublin has a Grand Championship! I am thrilled. He’s jumping on me and I love it. I don’t say “down.” Now, if ever, is the time for unfettered Irish exuberance.



It is late afternoon and Sporting is the last group. These are top notch dogs; all the winners of all the Sporting Classes from the day, vying now for best of Group. Most of the handlers are professionals. The judge calls each dog into the ring one by one. It is very cool to be showcased. Dublin has his confidence. I feel my pride. I stack for final judging. Dublin’s eyes are riveted on me. The judge is pacing down the line-up. She is looking at the best dogs of the day. Then, the decision: “the Pointer first, Golden Retriever second;” and suddenly, music, “Irish Water Spaniel third place”. I want to linger here, listening to the echo of these words. I may never hear them again so it is going to last me for a lifetime.

So that’s our journey. Some luck, some strategy, a lot of persistence and most importantly an enthusiastic Irish Water Spaniel who is a wonderful companion. Winning was wonderful but all I can think about are so many IWS friends that reached out to a new person offering advice, scissoring, support, encouragement. Maybe someday he will even heel down a crowded street and sleep under the Starbucks coffee table. Or not; doesn’t matter. Love the boy.

Perhaps my story will inspire others to enter the confirmation ring. Here is a summary of the most important lessons I learned during my journey.

1. *Foremost: have fun with your dog. Show only if your heart is in it, not for some obligation. Our dogs are meant to comfort us, challenge us and at the end of the day be a fun addition to our souls. If you don’t want to show, find some other activity that brings joy to you and your dog.*

2. *Find a mentor. Ask for a mentor. Someone that will listen and guide. It doesn't necessarily have to be your breeder. Someone with experience, patience and great attitude to support you through your journey.*
3. *Your dog does not understand a dog show. It is noisy, hectic and full of strange sounds and smells. Do you and your dog a favor. Go to shows before you enter one and just walk around . Ten minutes at a time. Start in open spaces and work up to crowded aisles. Go slow. Think from your dog's perspective.*
4. *If possible, find someone to look after you at your first shows. What collar do I use? When should I arrive? Where do I set up? When is ring time? When do I go in? Maybe you know this, but if not, ask. There is so much that will happen quickly. Judges want to keep a fast pace. People want to be helpful, just ask.*
5. *Smile. Really, try to smile a lot. It helps you and helps your dog. Be persistent.*

Best of luck, Chuck Turner



**If you enjoyed this story Chuck requests that you consider making a donation to IWSCA Rescue.
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