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THE DOGS

The alpha in a pack of Rottweilers, there's not much that intimidates this business consultant **BY Ivy Grace**

“don’t like to be bored,” says Jill Johnson, president of Johnson Consulting Services in Minneapolis. Maybe that’s why her client list is peppered with a cross-section of industries including health care, law and accounting firms, trade associations, government agencies and non-profits. And it’s probably why she trains and shows Rottweilers all over the country in her spare time.

Rottweilers are feisty, strong-willed, and highly intelligent and that’s what draws Jill to the breed. Her love affair began when she met “Ice,” a Rott belonging to a friend of hers. When the friend’s dog gave birth to a pup, both Jill and the dog took a liking to each other, but the owner’s conditions for taking the pup were stringent: buy a house with a fenced-in backyard, do obedience training, and if the dog is good enough, hit the dog show circuit. Jill agreed to the terms and bought a house in Fridley, which she calls, “The most expensive doghouse I’ll ever buy.” But it was a good investment; since then Johnson and her husband, Jack Tebbe, have owned six Rottweilers, fostered three others, and intermittently fostered other breeds over the years.

Jill and Solo started obedience training and began to enter competitions, where Jill says she learned humility. “When you have a dog walking 15 feet behind you in the ring and the judge is laughing at you, there’s nothing you can do but keep going.” The same holds true in business, she says, “You have to stay in the moment and not take it personally. You can either address [an issue] constructively and professionally, or you can melt and collapse.”

Confirmation shows, where dogs are judged according to breed standards, paved the road to the famed Westminster Kennel Club dog show and Johnson’s next dog, Kadi, went all the way. Named one of the top 20 Rottweilers nationally in 1996, she competed at Westminster in 1997. Throughout her career, Kadi won obedience and confirmation titles in Canada as well and was named to the Rottweiler Hall of Fame.

It was with Kadi that Jill learned about the business of breeding. To increase Kadi’s visibility she wrote snappy copy and placed ads in breed-specific and national dog magazines. “Just like you market your business, you market your dog so people will come to you for breeding.”

But disappointment followed when, despite consultations with reproduction specialists, five attempts to breed Kadi failed. “I learned a lot about letting go,” says Johnson. “Even with all that tenacity and expertise you don’t always get what you want.”

By the time Walker, a male, joined the pack, Johnson understood the fickle nature of judging. Despite earning eligibility for Westminster in 2001, Walker did not compete when Johnson learned the judge wasn’t a good fit. “It’s a very subjective sport,” she says.

And it’s a constant road show. “Most shows are just weekend shows; you leave on a Friday, you tear down and go home on Sunday night.” But at the higher levels, dogs compete on a circuit that can last as long as two weeks. Because of the grueling schedule, Johnson hired handlers to show Kadi and Walker.



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When Maddie came on the scene, Jill took the leash for both obedience and confirmation and the two enjoyed an electric connection in the ring. And despite Maddie’s structural shortcomings, on one occasion she won best of breed at a local show in Madison, Wisconsin.

Maddie, has now retired; Solo, Kadi, and Walker have passed away. But Megan (a year-and-a-half) and Sammy (six months) have filled out the pack and Jill is gearing up for the next round of events. She has high hopes for the young dogs, both sired by the current Rottweiler national champion, and she’s planning to be hands-on in both obedience and confirmation competitions.

That means training schools and private instruction at least once a week and daily sessions in the back yard. “I play train-my-dogs,” she

says. "Not only do you develop and enhance your relationship, but it keeps the dog stimulated. If they're bored they get into trouble because they're smart."

Having worked with clients in 21 states and internationally, Johnson knows that what works in one location or industry might not work in another. It's no different with her dogs. "All the relationships are different," she says. "You have to find different ways to communicate. You take the dogs where they are."

As with Solo and Kadi, Jill plans to certify her younger dogs for therapy work. She's seen the profound effect it can have with children and the elderly. "To have a dog that's under control that you can take into a hospital and that can make a human connection is an extraordinary experience."

Jill employs her dogs as ambassadors for the breed, appearing with them at pet fairs, schools, and the Minnesota State Fair. And if proposed legislation to ban Rottweilers gains momentum she'll be front and center, with her dogs, to speak against it. "In the 15-16 years I've been involved with the breed, I've seen and touched thousands of Rotts. I've only met four that frightened me," she says.

"These dogs are family," Jill says, "they're friends, they're companions." And for Jill it's not about collecting titles or ribbons, it's about being in the competition and learning a few lessons along the way. "You don't always win. I don't get every proposal I bid on. It's about keeping it in perspective." **MB**

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Best in Show



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