

Under the warm June sun of Del Mar, California, we came together to compete, to talk, to make and renew friendships, and to enjoy ourselves. "We" consisted of several hundred dairy goats breeders, owners and enthusiasts, and 1400 of our most important goats. It was the largest, most competitive show ever held, and would hold that distinction for several years to come. I was 18 at the time, and while our goats were making their mark in the competitive shows of the Northwest, I had never ventured beyond the safety of the regional show circuit. Judges and friends had encouraged me to go, including Rick Stoneback. Rick was from Pennsylvania, and we had met two years before when he was showing in Oregon following the 1976 Nationals. We were a couple years apart in age, and I envied Rick the accomplishments he had made at the national level. Give me a challenge, and I'll run with it, and I was ready to do anything he could. Since it would be two more years until the Nationals were again held on the West Coast, I decided it was time to attend. I chose to take GCH des Ruhigestelle Puppis 2*M, our top Saanen doe, and found a ride with a friend. After a fairly uneventful trip, she and I wound up in the enormous, gaily decorated barns of the Southern California Expo.

Thinking that Puppi needed a tonic the night before show day, I enlisted Rick to help. Never a Saanen fan, it took quite a bit of convincing for him to even concede to look closely at one. Reluctantly, he finally walked to her pen, muttering about the 'kid' (myself) and her worthless 'damn white goats.' Lifting the metal latch of the cyclone pen, I aroused a disgruntled Puppi and led her into the wide sandy aisle. Seeing a potential admirer, she immediately lifted her regal head and eyed him squarely, daring him to ignore her. Whistling softly, he ran his experienced hands over her slowly, checking for the usual faults of the snow white breed. His eyes registered surprised approval as he straightened slowly, whispering quietly, "that's not a damn white goat, that's a Saanen."

After giving Puppi a beer tonic, I unrolled my sleeping bag in the deep straw of the cluttered tack pen next to her. Still smelling of spilled beer, I laid awake, watching her lower jaw rhythmically move in diagonal strokes as she slowly and contentedly chewed her cud. Despite her silent confidence, nervous butterflies began creeping into my stomach. My fingers quivered as I touched her forgotten barn collar, tossed haphazardly into the pen, and now half buried in the straw in front of me.

As I walked about the spacious barns the next morning, I realized that not only was this the largest show I had ever seen, it was also easily the most competitive. Of the 1400 dairy goats, 228 were Saanens. Wishing only for a reasonably high class placing, my hopes were shattered as I found more and more beautiful does. Retreating back to Puppi, I could see each of her small weaknesses magnify itself until it became an obvious, glaring fault to me.

Puppi was in the last class of the day. Watching in awe as the younger does were judged, the day passed quickly. The judges were Norman Austin from Oklahoma, and Martha Griner from New Jersey. Norman had 'discovered' Puppi the year before at the Oregon State Fair, and had encouraged me to attend. He was known as the showiest judge in the nation, moving rapidly, yet gracefully around the ring, always immaculately dressed and giving the most eloquent sets of reasons I have ever heard. He was dressed in a white suit that was yet to have a wrinkle or stain. Beside him, Martha looked small and insignificant. A closer look revealed a proper East Coast lady, dressed conservatively, with a keen eye and gentle, yet unyielding expression.

The classes were large and it was well after 9 pm when I found myself dressed in show whites standing next to the in gate, holding Puppi's silver chain show collar in one hand and nervously making last minute touch-ups to her immaculate white coat with the other. A flaming sunset had passed, and it was nearly dark. The ring and stands were in a large, open tent. Floodlights hung from the top of the center post, which, due to the stand location, was near the corner of the ring. An enormous bouquet flanked the base of the post, the brilliant multi-colored roses and gladiolas contrasting with the honey colored shavings. The bright light reflected off the shavings, making them seem almost luminous.

The smell of cedar tickled my nostrils as Puppi and I stepped into the open arena. With every nerve taut, we moved slowly around the showring as one. With her head high, eyes alert, and ears forward, Puppi seemed to challenge the right of any doe to occupy the same ring with her. Pausing slightly with each regal step, she commanded the attention of everyone near the ring. Acutely attuned to her every move, I became a minor accessory in her presence.

The fragrant smell of flowers mingled with the cedar as we neared the elegant display. As we turned the corner, I glanced up into the stands. Sitting directly in front were several friends and colleagues. Some were people who had helped and encouraged me as I learned to show. Others were respected judges and breeders who until that week I had only known as names. Some were friends, come to watch and cheer us on. Harvey Considine and Wes Nordfelt were in the front row. Earlier in the year they had helped me to earn my first ADGA judge's license, and now were here watching me show. The smiles and nods they gave me as we walked past filled me with warmth and encouragement, making me realize that I really was part of this national family of goat people.

As the class formed a line in the center of the large arena, Norman and Martha began to quickly examine each doe. After thoroughly checking each one, they stepped back to confer. The audience was breathlessly silent. I could hear my heart thudding loudly. After many years showing goats, and with numerous regional champions behind me, I suddenly felt incompetent and nervously looked to the sidelines for support. Sitting in front, Rick responded with a small gesture, and my sweating, trembling hand moved to correct the quarter inch Puppi's foot had moved. With one eye trained on the judges, I noticed a slight nod in our direction. The butterflies, now the size of Monarchs, stampeded against my ribcage. At last Norman moved. Stepping away from Martha, slowly at first, then with a final word, he walked quickly, toward Puppi! With a clear, graceful gesture, he motioned us to start a new line. The silence broke into pandemonium as I led Puppi forward with leaden, rubbery legs.

A last minute check by Martha and Norman jolted me back into consciousness. A slight perspiration had broken out on his forehead, (to this day, the only time I ever saw Norman sweat). Still silent, he motioned the class to circle the ring once more, and at the last moment gave me a quick smile. Puppi lifted her feet gracefully, placing each one carefully in the shavings. I'm pretty sure mine never touched the ground. The victory walk seemed to last forever as we moved through the spotlight by the bouquet, past the now grinning Harvey and Rick, along the sideline by the applauding crowd and finally across the center to stand proudly in the spotlight.

Puppi was named National Champion as a hysterical group of friends from the Northwest began a standing ovation. After the awards and countless pictures, Puppi and I slowly walked out of the ring, lingering to preserve the moment. At the gate she hesitated and looked back at the showring. Tossing her head slightly, she stepped proudly through the gate into the waiting crowd of friends. She had known it all along.