

Leaping into the Limelight with Runner the Yellow Lab

By Josh Hagy

Some dogs are born to be stars. Others have stardom thrust upon them. Either way, Runner doesn't seem to mind. "The spotlight just sort of fell on us. I did not pursue it," said Donna Anderson, the owner of the nine-year-old yellow Lab. "Dog trainers around here know him well and what he can do and they referred folks to us." Those referrals would launch Runner's showbiz career and make him as famous as a local American Idol finalist.



Runner poses for a photo for Family Dog Digest. The magazine touted Runner as "Richmond's Newest Idol."

Runner's wide ranging repertoire of talents and tricks has made him almost as famous as Elliot Yamin, a star of last year's American Idol who also happens to hail from Richmond, Virginia. "Runner was touted as Richmond's newest Idol by the Family Dog Digest, a pet magazine," said Donna. "This was because of the commercials and still shoot he did for Ukrops and The Richmond Times Dispatch. From one day of shooting they made two commercials and ran them every day throughout the day for three weeks. They also used the still shots of him in the Times Dispatch to try and help sell papers and subscriptions. The tag line they used was. 'You need to know stuff and eat stuff too.'"



This is a photograph of an advertisement in the Richmond Times-Dispatch featuring Runner.

*This is a photograph of an advertisement
in the Richmond Times-Dispatch featuring Runner.*

Perhaps one of the most difficult aspects of show business is being “discovered” by the right people. Donna discovered this amazing Lab after becoming intrigued by a Search and Rescue demonstration in Richmond. “One day about 10 years ago I saw a Search and Rescue demo by a Richmond group and I was mightily impressed by the large yellow Lab that so handily pulled a 200 pound man out of a barrel lying on the ground,” recalls Donna. “Part of the demo was to search for and save a man trapped in a situation, in this case a barrel. The man did not make it easy for the dog to pull him out. I was looking for a dog with a high work ethic to train for agility and this looked like the kind of dog for me.”

Donna began to ask around about breeders, and it was there she first heard the name Marge Samuels of Amber Run Kennels in Jetersville Virginia. “They breed and hunt dogs in field trials. These are real working dogs. I called them and they had a litter almost ready to go.” Donna made the trip to Jetersville to check out the litter in hopes of finding a Lab that was a perfect fit for her.



Who could resist this face?



Runner soars through a hoop.

She was looking for some very specific attributes in her Lab. “I wanted a Lab with a narrower body style so he would be lighter weight and not put so much strain on his joints for all the jumping I was going to want him to do and not the big full chest of the father. So I closed my eyes and felt for the male pup with the smallest neck/chest area. I already knew all the pups were quite retrieving driven.”

Ironically, one pup’s affinity for Donna’s shoe laces proved to be deciding factor. “Two pups seemed to be quite equal in the neck area so I observed them some more and decided against the one that could not seem to let go of my shoe laces. Runner was the other one. His real name is Amber Run's Peak Performer a.k.a. Runner.”

While Runner has appeared in the Richmond Times Dispatch and has come to love the camera, the versatile Lab’s talents extend further than just showbiz. “Runner not only is an AKC Master Agility Champion but in 1992 he was in the top 10 for AKC jumpers,” added Donna. “He is also regarded as one of the fastest

Labs in the U.S. and is listed on a web site as such. He has won more than 50 first placements in agility, running against some of the fastest Border Collies.”



Donna leads Runner through an agility course.

Not one to let all that energy and agility go to waste, Runner has been known to do a little two-step. “Runner also is a ‘Dancing Dog,’” added Donna. “He did not take regular Obedience classes as a pup but I put him in a Canine Freestyle Class for about 1.5 years. He has a wonderful dance routine to the song "Happy Boys and Happy Girls" by AQUA.”



*Runner dances a jig to
"Happy Boys and Happy Girls" by AQUA.*

Runner has also, hunted, tracked, trained through AKC Utility Obedience, and though he hasn't competed, he has trained in Flyball, and trained in service dog skills. "He's a pretty good Frisbee player too," she added. Like everything else, though, stardom takes hard work. "You have to start young. Runner was 8 weeks old," explained Donna. "Use positive reinforcement methods, i.e., clicker training, and practice, practice, practice."

The attitude of the dog is a major factor in the success of the training and Donna found herself blessed with a Lab that loved to work. "It helps to have a workaholic. Runner needs to work and is unhappy just lounging around. He loves to work and learn and train and is happiest doing so." She shared that the most valuable behaviors to teach a dog for this type of work are "stay" (sit, down,

stand) at a distance, targeting, come, and retrieve work including “hold.” And added, “Believe it or not competition style heel is almost useless, hardly ever needed, most of the time they want a dog to act like a normal dog out for a walk and pull on the leash, but not pull too hard.”

Has all the fame gone to Runner’s head? Well, maybe just a little. “He is a ham and loves to show off. He is 9 years old and people still think he is a puppy because of the excitement he shows when working,” said Donna. That exuberance, however, makes for one happy and intelligent Lab. “He could probably be taught just about anything in a very short amount of time he is so quick to pick up new behaviors. Everyone that meets him loves him and makes converts of cat people and dog haters.” After all, who could resist a superstar Lab like Runner?