

# Kerry Blue Terrier's Quest for the **First** **Versatile Companion Dog Title**

## **VCD1**

I guess it started when I looked in the yard and saw my Kerry Blue Terrier puppy, Cailin, with her nose down and following a trail of an animal that had passed through in the night. What I didn't know then, looking at my new puppy, was that we were headed on a quest that would last two and half years and would end with a historical accomplishment — the first Kerry Blue Terrier to earn the Versatile Companion Dog 1 title (VCD1) from the American Kennel Club. This challenging title honors those dogs that have earned four titles in three specific, different AKC sports: 1 obedience title, 1 tracking title, and 2 agility titles.



I picked up twelve-week-old Cailin in February of 1998 from her breeders, Beverly Bracken and Joan Lambert, and showed her as a pup for ring experience. Then I held her out until her color changed and resumed showing her to her championship in December of 2000. For fun, I did specializing with her for another six months and picked up a number of Best Of Breeds and a Group 2 at the Palm Beach County DFA shows. That summer, an attempt at breeding her was made, but no success.



I really didn't want to sit around with Cailin and not be active in some dog sport. I was always curious about obedience, but had never really tried it. After all, Cailin did get her Canine Good Citizenship certificate at eighteen months of age, so I figured "why not"!

At our conformation classes in Fort Lauderdale, I would often watch the different obedience classes at work. So, in November of 2001, I enrolled in the Basic Obedience class offered by Command Dog Training, the same place that offered our breed classes. It was just a seven-week course that covered everyday behaviors for an on-leash dog. I learned that, just as in the show ring, it's not always my dog that I have to watch, but the other guy's dog. Cailin passed this class with flying colors and moved on to Drill class.

It was in December of 2001 that we found our tracking class, run by an agility club in West Palm Beach. I soon found myself driving north for Sunday morning tracking class and leaving the weekday evenings for other classes. It was a routine of different weekly sports, which we would follow for some time. While at tracking practice, we heard of a new title offered by the AKC. But, we'll get back to discussing our tracking later.

The Drill class was run by a little lady from Tennessee with a wireless microphone and amplifier for all to hear. At times there were 30 dogs in class, but this instructor had eyes in the back of her head and would not let you get away with anything. She made sure you did it right. Some people could handle drill class and others could not — it was that challenging. Two weeks into drill class, I told our in-

structor that I wanted to go for the AKC's Companion Dog title (CD) and, you guessed it, she rode me even harder. And for a while, we added a second class at a local rodeo arena to our weekly schedule. To earn a Companion Dog title, a dog must be able to complete the list of required exercises: Heel on Lead and Figure Eight, Stand for Exam, Heel Free, Recall, Long Sit, and Long Down. The scoring ranges from a high of 200 to the lowest passing score of 170.

One advantage that I had with Cailin in obedience was that I showed her in the breed ring with a non-choking Resco leash. Cailin had never really been on a choke collar. I never had to "pop" her very hard; all she needed was to hear the sound of the chain links moving to give me "instant respect" and respond to my commands. And I think that famous "soft" throat of the Kerry Blue Terrier helped, too.

After four weeks of drill class, I entered a local obedience match and quickly realized that we needed more training. The long sit and down stays were good, but I gave a double command on the recall and she lagged in heeling. We passed, but I wasn't happy with the effort. We needed to fine-tune our performance. Oh well, more practice work at home, followed by another match the next weekend. At this match, Cailin did so much better; her heeling and recalls were on back on track, and I did better a job of issuing commands. I came away

feeling very positive — and hoping she would be ready for her first trial in two weeks.

We had entered just one day at a local all-breed show. This show is held at a rodeo arena on bare red clay and is the site where we had picked up a second class. Experience there had taught me that dogs often drag their nose thru that smelly red arena clay, and I didn't want Cailin to be one of them. Luckily, Cailin never bothered tracking there.

The day of the show, Novice A Obedience didn't start until the all-breed show was over; practically no one was there, so no distractions. Cailin was right on the money, and I surprised my friends at a local pub with a first place Novice A win and a high score of 190.5.

Two weeks later, we were entered both days at another all-breed show in Lake City, Florida. This time, it was outdoors on a nice mild weekend. On Saturday, Cailin worked very well. She lagged on Free Heel, but we qualified with a second-place finish. That was two legs done, so just one more leg needed for a title. Sunday, I could tell something was wrong because Cailin was very timid and unsure of herself. While waiting for class,

I figured out what was happening — she was in season. I knew that bitches in heat were ineligible, but we were the only ones entered. As we entered the ring, I kept my fingers crossed. But it was her old nemesis, Free Heel, that almost killed us. She just didn't want to stick to me. I thought we'd blown it, but she passed! Boy, was I happy. That was two months of Basic Class, two months of Drill Class, three entries, three qualifying legs, and one new title.

Since Cailin was in season, another breeding was attempted —again, no luck. A decision was made to spay her, which put an end to any thoughts of motherhood for Cailin. The rest of 2002 was spent with tracking classes and helping friends show their terriers in the breed ring. In January of 2003, I attended an agility trial, and this time I not only observed but also asked a lot of questions. Since I was still confident about Cailin's performance in obedience, and since I already belonged to an agility club (for tracking class) where the classes were free, we started agility classes in March of 2003.

The AKC's agility trials consist of two types of courses for two different titles: Standard Agility and Jumpers With Weaves Agility. The lowest level of agility is the Novice title. Novice Standard agility is comprised of 13-15 obstacles laid out on course: Dog Walk, A Frame, See-saw, Pause Table, Weave Pole (6 poles), Open Tunnel, Chute, Bar Jump, Double Bar Jump, Panel Jump, Tire Jump, and the Broad Jump. The Novice Jumpers With Weaves course is just what the name implies, jumps and the 6-pole weave set.

We started with Obedience





for Agility class and spent several weeks there before moving onto Agility Level I class. This is where an introduction to the different obstacles is made. We began putting together sequences of obstacles in Level II and then doing full runs with different techniques in Level III. As things progressed I sometimes frustrated the instructors by balking at some of the more intricate footwork required by the dog's handler. I have a bad knee from playing football and rugby and didn't always feel comfortable making twists, turns, and cuts in the soft sugar sand of southern Florida. So, if the instructor barked at me, I just gave it back to 'em.

I quickly learned that body language dictated to your dog what was required at each obstacle.

With a bad knee, I tried to stay consistent and never did anything too tricky to disrupt Cailin's runs. Novice A agility is run pretty much in a straightforward fashion, and I always kept Cailin on one side. I have a stride long enough to keep up with her, and I can shorten my stride to slow her down. We had started in March, and by October I felt it was time to enter a trial. After the annual visit to the Montgomery County terrier shows, I entered Cailin in the Miami Obedience Club's three-day agility trial.

Our first weekend competing in the 20-inch class of Novice Standard and the Novice Jumpers with Weaves proved to be educational and successful. On Friday, we passed Jumpers and placed fourth in the 20-inch Novice class. I started

thinking that agility success was going to be as quick as our success in the obedience ring. But my hopes were tainted when it came to the Standard course. Cailin got herself wrapped up in the fabric of the chute. It was my fault — I had not stayed with her but had peeled off to the next obstacle and left her in the chute. I didn't want this experience to scar her, so I immediately drove up to my club's training facility to practice the chute. The next day was a case of not having our timing together. She completed each obstacle, but knocked down bars in both events. Sunday was a different matter. Cailin and I ran as a team and we double qualified. We picked up second place ribbons in both events.

The following weekend, we went

to Palmetto, Florida, and ran in trials sponsored by the Dog Training Club Of Tampa. On Saturday, we didn't qualify in either event. In Jumpers, Cailin knocked a bar and, in the Standard course, I learned a valuable lesson. Once again the chute was the big issue and Cailin refused to go through, so I ran past her and I let her skip it. It turns out we were well under time, and if I had only stayed with and talked her into running through the chute, we would've qualified. This was an example of not being fully aware of the rules on my part. Lesson learned, because on Sunday, I stayed with Cailin at the chute, talked her thru it, and she picked up first in the 20-inch Novice class. In Jumpers, we failed on the slick clay surface and a bar got knocked (yeah, I know – excuses, excuses).

We had another month of practicing before our next trial and, just like in obedience, we added a second agility class to our weekly regiment. At the beginning of December we showed at the Miami Dog Club's indoor show. Cailin did great in Jumpers and picked up her third leg and a first place ribbon to finish her Novice Agility Jumpers With Weaves title (NAJ). But on the Standard course, Cailin picked up a new problem: she refused to jump the tire.

Nothing could make her go through it either day. So, it was back to solving a new problem. And this time I made a tire jump out of black, flexible PVC tubing. I placed it between two couches and had Cailin jumping the tire back and forth while watching TV.

Our next trial was a couple of weeks later in West Palm Beach. It was my club's trial, Tailwagger's Agility Club, and I really wanted this title on this weekend. We ran the Jumpers course for fun and a warm-up. And thankfully, after much coaxing on a very windy day on an outdoor course, Cailin picked up her final leg, a first-place ribbon and another title, Novice Agility (NA). Okay, now with three of the four titles needed for the VCD1, it was time to concentrate solely on the elusive Tracking Dog title (TD). As I mentioned previously, we had

started on-and-off tracking in December of 2001; this was now January of 2004, and the time was ripe to get it done.

But let's go back in the timeline to our first tracking classes of 2001. At my first tracking class I was pleasantly surprised to find 4 AKC tracking judges running the course. I learned that training for tracking is not for those looking for instant success. It takes a full year of training before entering a TD test and, even then, it's only a 50 percent pass/fail ratio. Training for tracking requires "baby steps." These slow steps give you a chance to conquer all the different elements of tracking: length, age of the track, turns, unfamiliar track layers, various outdoor elements (weather and terrain) and, of course, motivation. Then there is the handler's training – learning to read and trust your dog. After all,



*Dwyer 20*

the dog is wearing a harness, not a collar, and you are at the end of a 20-foot lead, which gives you very little control.

Briefly, for a Tracking Dog title (TD), the AKC require the following: a track 440-500 yards long with two starting flags (first and thirty; first leg at least 60 yards long before first turn; minimum length of any leg after the first leg = 50 yards; track to be 30 minutes to 2 hours; 3 to 5 turns (no acute turns less than 90 degrees); both left and right turns (at least 2 of these should be 90-degree turns); and, of course, a glove at the end of track.

In order to enter a test, you must first be certified. This means that you have contacted a tracking judge to lay out a regulation TD track, with age and length, and that you have successfully passed running the track. The judge will give four certificates to enter four TD test within a 12-month period. You cannot enter an AKC TD test without being certified. If you fail four TD tests in a one-year period, you must be re-certified to enter more tests. You mail in your certificate with your entry form when entering a test. Certification eliminates wasting time, energy, and land on dogs that are not ready for a test. When we started the class, our first objective was to follow short straight tracks with bait on them, which were laid by each dog's owner. In a few weeks we moved to having someone else lay tracks for each dog. Turns were slowly introduced, followed by aging Cailin's track to beyond 30 minutes. We slowly built confidence along the way.

Cailin was doing well, but not great, by the time classes stopped due to the humidity in the summer of 2002. To keep her interest peaked, I would lay short tracks in the shade of some nearby office buildings.

When class resumed in late August, Cailin had a turning point for the worse. One day, out on a track, she gave up on a track and appeared to lose motivation. We went back and put bait on the track and she still refused. Maybe we had come back into the southern Florida heat too soon and she was simply burnt out. I became dejected and wondered what to do. The instructors had told me that every tracking dog will lose motivation at least once in a career. We stopped tracking for a while. The challenge was to find her motivation again.

As the humidity subsided, my daily routine was to come home at lunch, play Frisbee with Cailin, and then go back to work. I saw her love of Frisbee, and it dawned on me to use the flying disc as bait alongside the glove for tracking.

In January of 2003, we went back to class and started short tracks with the Frisbee and the glove at the end. Once she found both items, I allowed her to play Frisbee. Cailin's motivation quickly returned and we went back to previous progress.

I was also grateful that the instructors and classmates started giving Cailin the earliest tracks to avoid the heat of the day and to take advantage of the cooler mornings. Our class consisted of eight sporting dogs, the occasional hound, and one Kerry Blue Terrier. It took some educating on my part to explain to everyone in class that Kerries, with a non-shedding dark blue coat and a slightly darker skin tone, just aren't made for southern Florida heat.. They learned about the "melting dog syndrome" or, in my case, "melting Kerry Blue syndrome".

One experience that helped me was to be a track layer for my club's TD

trial in West Palm Beach. I gained insight into exactly what judges are looking for in a TD track and how a regulation track is laid out. We stopped going to the weekend tracking classes at the end of June due to the heat and continued on with the weekday evening agility class. We picked up tracking again in November, as the heat subsided, and practiced on those weekends we didn't go to agility trials.

When Cailin earned her agility titles at the end of the December, we stopped the agility classes and started picking up steam by laying more practice tracks after work during the week. The weather was cooler and Cailin really enjoyed it.

In February, I went to a two-day tracking seminar in Ocala. While there, the local Australian Shepard club was having a certification test across town, and I was invited to come. I showed up for the seminar, then quickly drove across to the certification tests, held in a beautiful pasture. The minute I got out of the truck, I knew Cailin could do it. And twenty minutes later, Cailin proved me right. Of the two judges at the tests, both said they would've given the title to her that day based upon the way she worked that track. After that, the rest of the weekend was a breeze. I was elated. We were now eligible to enter four TD tests in the next twelve months.

The Tracking Club Of Central Florida offered a March test in Orlando, and we entered our first test. At this test, Cailin started off strong on the first two legs, but at the third turn she hesitated like she wanted to turn and then went off in another direction. With Cailin at the end of a 20-foot lead, I looked down and saw that she was following a track all right, but one with tiny little footprints — she was following armadil-

lo tracks! I soon heard the dreaded whistle, meaning “you failed,” Out of seven dogs that day, only two passed.

A few weeks later we were in an April test in West Palm Beach, sponsored by the Obedience Training Club Of Palm Beach County. This site is made up of short-cut grass fields that are used to train polo ponies. At this test, Cailin started off like she had been shot out of a cannon. She was really on and made every turn – until the last one. She went 380 yards but turned early and missed the last leg. The whistle blew; we failed. But I was really proud of her; I knew she could do it. Of the three dogs entered, all failed.

We still had two certificates left, but I wanted to get this title, so I entered Cailin in the last test of the season. This June test was sponsored by my club, Tailwagger’s Agility Club, and the site was the same polo field that we had used in April. We had a few weeks to practice, and I made the most of them.

On June 6, 2004, Cailin went 450 yards with four turns, no whistles, and got her Tracking Dog title. Looking back, I discovered it’s been at least eight years since a Kerry Blue Terrier has earned a tracking title of any kind from the AKC – and Cailin had done it.

Not only did she pick up the TD title but **Cailin was now the first Kerry Blue Terrier to earn the Versatile Companion Dog 1 title.** WHEW! What a relief!

When I look back at our accomplishments, there were several keys to our success that could apply to all dog sports. Some of those keys are:

- Think of trials and tests as expensive practice. Remember to breathe

and not to be tense or nervous. Your emotions can pass down the lead to your dog.

- Be aware of the weather. Kerry Blues are prone to “melting dog syndrome” and cannot tolerate heat and humidity
- Practice in class is great, but practice daily at home, too. For agility, set up weaves and jumps in the yard; for obedience, you can practice on the sidewalk.
- Volunteer at your particular event. You’ll gain insight and know what to expect you’re ready to compete.
- Have a working knowledge of the rules; a great reference is the AKC’s web site, [www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)
- Don’t expect too much from a young dog. Cailin was three when we started this quest and had been in breed ring long enough to experience many situations.
- Motivation, motivation, motivation, whether it’s food bait, praise, toys or even a Frisbee. There always needs to be a reward.

One thing that I’m very grateful for is the support and training I received from all our instructors and friends. We couldn’t have done it without them.

With everything that we did, I wanted it to be fun. When I played Frisbee with Cailin, I always tied up her fall (the hair between her eyes), which enabled her to have a better view. It also improved her ability to catch the flying disc. I wanted her to relate this grooming technique to having a particular kind of fun, not just going for a walk, or a ride in the car. So, I always tied up her hair for obedience, agility, and tracking. She knew then that she would be able to see clearly and that we could do something – but mostly I think she knew that I wanted us to have fun.

After passing a tracking test, the

object of the exercise, the glove is signed by the judges and track-layer and presented to those that pass. When I came home with Cailin’s glove, I placed it high up on a bookshelf with her ribbons. Days later, I found Cailin staring at the bookshelf and crying. It took me awhile to figure out what was wrong – she wanted her glove! I placed that glove in a large ziplock baggie and gave her another glove. Do you think she associates the glove with fun? I do.

In December of 2001, we had started our first tracking class with Tailwaggers Agility Club, and at this class I met one of our instructors, Jane Craig. While there, Jane was presented with a belated end-of-the-year gift from the club for owning the first dog to earn the Versatile Companion Dog title from the AKC. Jane’s Weimaraner Sara was the first of any breed. This was the first time that I heard of this title, and little did I know where it would take us.

What’s next for Cailin? Maybe it will be sheep herding. Cailin does have a leg toward her Herding Capability Tested (HCT) from the American Herding Breeds Assoc. from a seminar sponsored by the Kerry Blue Terrier Club Of Central Florida.

So, now Cailin has new crate plates. One plate says Ch. Rosegarden’s Vagabond Star CD TD NA NAJ and the other says Ch. Rosegarden’s Vagabond Star VCD1. Either way, we got a little taste of different venues and canine sports – and we had a lot of fun along the way.