

## Dogging It In India

by Jason Lynn

This article was published in the Canine Chronicle March 2007 issue.



There are few places in the world which bring to my mind images as exotic, colorful and mysterious. So with great excitement and not a little trepidation I stepped off a plane into the city of Bangalore in India last fall, having been given an amazing opportunity: an eight week working holiday showing my breed, Cocker Spaniels, across the sub-continent of Asia. I was to handle dogs for Amit Gowda of Amrolyn Kennels. Although primarily a breeder of Great Danes, Amit is a budding American Cocker enthusiast. Earlier this year he visited Michael Gadsby at Afterglow Kennels in England, and didn't leave until he made arrangements to purchase a buff male, Ch. Afterglow Bugalugs, and a black and tan daughter of last year's top Cocker in the US "Douglas Fashion." These were to be the FIRST Cockers exhibited on the Indian show circuit, and the beginnings of a small breeding program for Amit. I am not sure what was harder for me to get my head around: that the country had never seen a Cocker Spaniel or that India had an actual show circuit!

Since this is a new breed by local standards and with the amount of grooming involved in showing them, Amit began to look for a foreign handler experienced in Cockers who would be able to come to India and stay for the show season. The idea was to get someone not only to show the dogs, but to train him and his kennel staff how to properly care for and trim their coats; that's where I came in, and through Michael I heard of the proposition. Never having traveled so far abroad, I was intrigued about the chance to not just visit but actually experience life on that side of the planet. I had recently left my job of nearly ten years working for Cocker handlers Michael and Linda Pitts. It seemed like perfect timing. In speaking to Amit through a series of emails and phone calls I was assured everything I needed would be provided for. I would be a guest in Amit's home, and have a driver available during the week if I wanted to venture around the city. The details were quickly and easily finalized. As an American, obtaining a VISA was very simple, and I was granted multiple entry for up to 6 months. When hearing of my plans, friends and



Ch. Afterglow Bugalugs  
and US handler Jason Lynn  
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family had mixed reactions of equal parts “That’s incredible!” and “What the hell are you thinking?” After some deliberation, I chose to take the road less-traveled and a chance for adventure.

Called “The Garden City” and Asia’s “Silicon Valley,” Bangalore is situated in the state of Karnataka in southern India. It is recognized internationally as a rapidly growing center of technology and industry, and many American companies have set up bases of operation there. The last time you called network support for your PC, chances are your call was diverted to one of the city’s numerous high-rise call centers. The designer clothes you bought in the mall may very well have been made in Bangalore; Tommy Hilfiger, Banana Republic, and United Colours are just a few of the brands who outsource the manufacturing of their clothing lines in the area. In the past 6 years, the city has seen its population soar due in part to this western influx and Bangalore’s year-round moderate climate. Industry has added to the city’s diversity, and its diversity to its cultural offerings. Here you can find a wide range of fabulous restaurants, spacious parks, modern theater, and prime shopping destinations.

My flight from London was smooth sailing and Amit was waiting for me at the airport when I arrived. The ride home gave me my first taste of driving in India. It was eye-opening to say the least! Apparently just about anything goes on the roads here as long as you a) don’t hit anyone, b) don’t get hit by anyone, and most importantly c) don’t hit the free-range cows wandering in and out of traffic; they are considered sacred in Hinduism, and most have full access to graze on garbage and patches of grass among the city streets. Otherwise, it seemed like free-style driving with no lanes. The streets were congested with compact cars, motorbikes, and auto-rickshaws set to a symphony of blaring horns.

Pedestrians non-chalantly crossed the streets into the path of oncoming busses, confident that the oncoming traffic would slow down just in time. Women on motorcycles wore helmets and sarees, and weaved fearlessly through the stop-and-go traffic with what seemed to be a sixth-sense of just how close they could get without crashing. In time, I came to realize that there actually was a method to all the madness, but for the duration of my stay I opted to remain a spectator only.

Amit’s father, Ravi, is the owner of several movie theaters in the area, including the Irvashi, a lavishly constructed building which was designed by the architect responsible for Sydney’s Opera House. Upon arriving at the Gowda home in Bangalore’s JP Nagar district, he and his wife greeted us at the ornate rosewood front door which depicted carvings of the family’s house god, Ganesh.

Mrs. Gowda had prepared a traditional tandoori meal, the first of many during my stay. With the demeanor of Indian royalty in a flowing gown with her long black hair pulled back in a gold clip, Anitha is the queen of her home and kitchen, and makes a mean naan bread. She’s an amazing chef actually, and can make hundreds of Indian dishes from memory. The family used to employ a chef but everyone preferred mom’s cooking. A couple of times each week she visits the local farmer’s market to buy fresh, locally-grown produce, meats and buffalo milk. It seems that India has been shopping organically for ages. I could sense right away that the food would be a highlight of the trip and I was not disappointed.

The next day we took a short drive outside of the city to take a tour and meet the dogs in Amit’s kennel. Gated and completely walled, his facilities were amazing and a great deal of time and thought had gone into their construction. Everything needed to keep dogs fit and healthy was there, from spacious runs to an



indoor training arena, and a doggie swimming pool; and even a veterinarian table with complete surgical equipment in case a c-section needed to be performed. The scale of the place was in keeping with the fact that Amit is a Dane breeder...large. A group of ten or so kennel staff live on the grounds and see to it that everything is neat and tidy and that the dogs are comfortable when Amit is away. Needless to say, I was impressed.



After watching the dogs run in the paddock, I decided we would concentrate on the buff male, "Bugsy," at the first weekend's show. He was the most mature and ready for the ring of the two Cockers.



Dog shows in India date back to the early 1900s and are held under the authority of The Kennel Club of India. Headed by Chairman Mr. S. Pathy, the KCI awards Challenge Certificates in dogs and bitches for each of its recognized breeds, much like the system in place in the UK. Due to extremes of weather and lack of indoor venues, India has a show season of 4 to 5 months held during its winter (November until March.) There are shows virtually every weekend and I was surprised to find out that some weekends had as many as three choices of where to enter. Show entries average 500 or less, and the working breeds dominate in numbers. Dobermans, Great Danes, GSDs, and Boxers consistently make up the highest breed entries. Labradors are also immensely popular. I attended only the first half of the season, and our schedule took us to the cities of Hyderabad (twice), Kolkata (formerly Calcutta), Chennai (formerly Madras), as well as an FCI show in Bangkok.



We were scheduled to leave for our first show the following morning. Our flight to the city of Hyderabad was only an hour long, but to drive there could easily have taken 10 or more due to poor roads and traffic congestion. The Andhra Pradesh Kennel Club was founded in 1945, and each year it hosts four all breed events. The venue was outdoors, as are all the shows there. Around 300 dogs were judged in two giant 60'x60' rings (per KCI rules), by two judges, Mrs. Leela Ratnam of India and Mrs. Betty Steptovich of Australia. Each 'ring' was considered a show, with a single judge judging each breed, group and best. This way of doing things made for long days. Most shows don't conclude Best until nearly 9 pm. Around the perimeter of the rings was a long line of tents which were rented out by exhibitors for shade and grooming space, similar to the stabling areas seen at horse shows. Without any electrical hook-ups available on the showgrounds, I bathed Bugsy in the room early that morning and hoped I would be able to keep him clean throughout the long day. It was an unusual concept after years of showing Cockers in the US where we are able to spray and blow dry the coats whenever needed. My other big concern was the weather, but despite a climbing temperature throughout the afternoon, it was cool inside the tent. A clip-on crate fan and a steady breeze kept the air circulating and "Bugsy" comfortable.



Ring procedure was basically the same as at our shows in America and elsewhere. As the only American Cocker, our breed judging was a quick in-and-out. It did count for a Challenge Certificate nonetheless. Then, almost immediately, we were back in for Gundog group competition and won first in that ring, and later, in the other ring as well. Around 8 pm the judging of Best in Show began, one judge's ring at a time. This is where our systems differ the greatest. Group first through third are called in by group order and lined up according to placing. From the 21 dogs in the ring, only those still undefeated are able to win Best. After that Reserve Best all the way to 8th BIS is chosen from any of the dogs left. Each dog was checked in by the stewards, and the judge did a quick exam of each, usually doing a down-and-back as well. Then the scores and notes were written and all the dogs were excused from the ring. The

same procedure took place again immediately following, now under the day's second judge. At the end of tabulating final points, the judge took a microphone and thanked the club, exhibitors, and so on. Then, in reverse order, each dog was called to the front, in reverse order from 8th up to 1st Best in Show. If that sounds confusing, you are correct. Not only did it take quite a while to get the dogs in the ring and organized, but keeping them standing for that long was very tiring. To make things more interesting, random spectators and pushy photographers frequently entered the ring during judging to snap close-up pics of dogs in line! Once a group of spectators became so loud in their cheering for a certain Pomeranian that policemen entered the ring and forced them back.

When the results were finally called out that night around nine o'clock, we were excited to learn we'd been awarded 1st Best in both rings! There was also the award given for Best Indian-bred, and it was obviously a proud and sentimental victory for each winner judging by the reaction of the handlers and crowd. I was skeptical about 8 BIS winners at a time, but I think that it gives encouragement for those new to the shows to stick around for the entire day and even have a shot at a higher placement. In that respect, it's not such a bad idea, and I think that more newcomers in America could benefit from sticking around to watch other breeds and group judging. There is always something to learn, and it seems to me that you can't fully grow as a breeder or handler by watching your breed's judging only and packing up to leave.

As I mentioned before, Cockers are considered "new" in India, and at each show we were a source of great interest from spectators and exhibitors alike. The sight of a Cocker in full coat caused a frenzy wherever we went on the grounds. All day long large crowds of people wanted to pose for a picture, and snap a shot of him on their cell phone cameras. Children shouted "Uncle! Uncle! What's his name?" and "What dog is that, Boss?" The local news wanted interviews and a photo session. And our new "fans" were always there to cheer us on each time we entered the ring. It was chaotic at times, especially when we wanted him to get some rest in his crate. I thought it was a tribute to the breed and his great character that "Bugsy" not only withstood the poking and prodding but loved every minute.

With this weekend under my belt, I was able to get an idea about what to expect from the rest of the show circuit as far as routine. Many of the shows had Australian, Canadian and American judges on the panels. At Bangalore Canine Club, George Murray from the US did working breeds and a Doberman specialty. He awarded the latter to a bitch bred in India, and gave an impromptu handling clinic in the ring following judging. Neither went unappreciated by the locals. I found that having the chance to talk to other Westerners on the weekends was something that I really looked forward to. I met a British couple at one show who are living in Sri Lanka for work. They are owners of a Standard Poodle and try to get to as many of the Indian shows as they can. One day, while in line for a drink, I heard a distinctly American accent, and found it belonged to a blonde woman with a Saluki bitch. I introduced myself and asked her where she was from, and it turned out that she was from Asheville, North Carolina. "I have a house there still, but I live in India full-time now," she said.

"So was it work that brought you here?" I thought it was a reasonable assumption.

"No, not at all, honey!" she replied. "My spiritual master led me here to find my destiny. Have you heard of Sai Baba?" Later, as she walked away, I wondered if her guru advised her on which shows to enter.

Each trip began with an early flight the morning before the show, and a return on the following Monday. Due



to the late finish each Sunday, I wondered how difficult it must be for those who drive and have to set off for a long journey home so late at night. But just like our dog community at home, there is a passion for dogs here that keeps the breeders, owners, and handlers coming back each week despite the difficulties. India is on the verge of explosion in the dog game. This year alone over 300 show dogs were imported there from several countries. Many of the group winners were imports, and I wasn't the only handler "imported" for the season. Several people I met have been to Westminster and Crufts, as well as World Shows in Europe and the Australian Royals.

Of the kennels I visited, most were good by US standards, and a couple were amazing. And many simply keep their dogs in the house. I was pleased to find that the dogs were treated with the same care and affection they receive from us at home. A big obstacle breeders face is the fact that so many breeds are few in number and a large percentage not represented at all. Starting a breeding program without importing a dog or two can be difficult with no selection of stud dogs in the country. A few guys had sent bitches to be mated in the US and Australia. Some have purchased and brought bitches into India in whelp, but many breeders abroad are understandably skeptical to get involved in such arrangements. However, the Indian breeders I met were as passionate about breeding great dogs as their fellow countrymen are about playing great cricket, and I suspect that as time goes by we will see India become recognized as a world-player in this international sport and Indian-bred dogs popping up at our shows.



The weeks flew by and suddenly I was back at Hindustan Airport for a final trip, but this one was to London. Looking back at when I began this journey, I was apprehensive about diving headfirst into a new culture, but it was nothing more than fear of the unknown. I was a clean slate when I arrived two months earlier, and now my mind was flooded with thoughts, emotions, and recollections playing in a stream

of consciousness as I sat waiting for my plane and eating a chicken tikka sandwich. Although I was looking forward to being reunited with friends and family, I was surprised at the mixed emotions I felt about leaving what had been home for the past eight weeks. The dog show aspect of the trip had been a success: I left with Bussy being top dog all breeds. It was the time I spent outside of the show ring that I would remember most. India is a place that gets under your skin and leaves an impression that you can't forget. The sights and sounds and smells are never dull. I am certain I will always carry a tiny part of this amazing land with me.

My hosts could not have been more kind and generous. Ravi and Anitha Gowda, along with Amit and his brother, Adit, went out of their way to make my trip enjoyable. They always saw to it that I was having a good time. I met so many great people at the shows, and the Indian breeders and handlers were really kind to me and supportive of the new breed in their rings. Many of them read the dog papers from around the world and know what is going on in our rings at home. After a show one night, a group of ten of us went out for a late dinner. Actually it was not late by Indian standards; 11:00 pm is a perfectly respectable hour. Most of the guys were speaking Kannada, the local language. Even though I didn't always know exactly what was being said, I could make out that they were reliving the day's show, celebrating wins, and gossiping. It suddenly occurred to me that I had been at this same dinner table a million times prior, in different restaurants, in different countries, with different characters. It made me realize how small the world really is, and how much we in the dog game have in common regardless of what side of the world we live on.