



# FROM IRELAND TO SWEDEN AND BEYOND

Paul Scanlon spoke to one of Ireland's best known ex-pats from the canine scene who has become a successful export for Ireland in one of the greatest dog showing countries in Europe.

Ger O'Shea was one of the best known handlers and exhibitors involved in the hobby in Ireland in the eighties and nineties and as part of the extremely successful Everready Kennels team he was responsible for handling many of the top winning dogs from that era to major successes. As with us all, life changes and brings about new circumstances and challenges and Ger moved to Sweden where he has lived since the mid nineties. Through his knowledge of dogs and his handling skills he has become one of the most influential handler/trainers in Sweden and works full time at his chosen career often travelling to other countries to train and teach owners and handlers on their specific dog related problems or to just plainly show them how to get the best out of their show dog. Show Dogs Ireland spoke to Ger to find out 'what makes him tick' and to tell us how he sees the differences between Ireland and Sweden on a number of canine related issues.



*Tell us a little about yourself Ger where you are living, the family, how many dogs you have.*

I live approx one hour outside Stockholm, in a small town called Åkers Styckebruk. We recently moved here, so that it would give us more room to further expand our business. My wife Emily and I have two wonderful children, Alva 7½ years old, and Kane who is 2½. At the moment we have five dogs living at home, four Rottweilers, and one Tibetan Spaniel. We have a few more dogs out on breeding terms, which is quite a common practice here

in Scandinavia. Many breeders will be prepared to let go of the best progeny with a contract saying that in the future they are allowed a litter from them. It's very unusual that breeders in Scandinavia have more than 4-5 dogs at home and there are many people who would like a quality dog or bitch for showing or working, but for one reason or another are not in a position to be breeders themselves. So this arrangement, with the help of legal contracts set out by the Swedish Kennel Club, suits both parties very well.

*What breeds have you become involved with since your move to Sweden?*

Internationally I have been very involved in my own breed, realising that the scope of participation is absolutely huge in Rottweilers. So in order for me to be competitive on an international level there is very little time left to become involved in any other breeds. Although when I moved to Sweden first, I was handling very many breeds, but only on a professional capacity.

*Have you shown dogs for other owners or have you mainly exhibited your own charges?*

As I said earlier, I have exhibited many dogs for their owners but only for the first few years in Sweden. According to FCI-rules, a judge can only handle dogs he owns, co-owns or dogs he bred. As I did not want to give up my judge's licence and this arrangement of co-ownership was not very suitable to most people, I decided I would instead teach handling on a more fulltime basis.

*What successes have you experienced showing in Scandinavia and Europe from your base in Sweden?*

To be honest, on coming to Sweden I was quite naive to the whole European show scene and just how big it was, I looked upon it as a new adventure. I spent the first few years in Sweden travelling and showing extensively, finding out what it really means to drive to a show. It's not so unusual for some of the top-dogs to travel for one or two days to get to a show. We were also doing a lot of travelling outside Sweden. During those first few years we achieved Championship titles in 11 different European countries, winning groups and sometimes Best in Shows all over Europe. We got Champion titles, Group wins and Best in Shows in 9 different European countries. This I would like to point



out, was mostly achieved when I was handling the legendary Rottweiler male **Multi Ch Rottriver's Gaston**, thanks to his owner **Anna-Greta Nordstedt**. With dogs I have owned or bred by myself I have been privileged to win many **Swedish Winner**-titles, **Nordic Winner**-titles (which is a title that will include the four Scandinavian countries), two **European Winner**-titles, and we are probably the first Nordic kennel that has managed to win two classes at the famous **German Club Sieger**. For this I feel especially proud, as the classes at the Club show can be anywhere between 70-100 dogs, consisting of probably the best Rottweilers in the world. We have also had numerous BOB and BOS at National, International Championship shows and Rottweiler Club shows in Sweden.

*You've been living now in Sweden for 12 years. How do you think Swedes and Irish people differ in their attitude to the dog in general?*

I think in Sweden and perhaps throughout Scandinavia, due to the influence of the Kennel Clubs and the Breed Clubs, it has become the culture in Sweden to prioritise very heavily on the complete package. For example: Rather than just being satisfied with a beautiful show dog, they want that same dog to be both physically and genetically healthy, as well as having the mentality to be able to cope in a modern society. And if it's a working or hunting breed, it still has the capacity to perform what it was originally designed for. This can sometimes make breeding very difficult. I do believe that the show scene in Ireland is much more social, which in turn creates a more relaxed atmosphere. In Ireland people gather info on their breeding through word of mouth and social interaction where in Sweden this information is mainly provided by the Kennel Club (through a computerised database). The social interaction between exhibitors in Ireland is one of the things I miss most. In Sweden when a show is over, everybody just packs up and goes home.



An appreciative audience listen intently to Ger's talk at a seminar in Rome, Italy.

*Was it difficult to adapt to the Swedish way of life when you first arrived in the country and to adopt the way of life and the changes it brought for you concerning your hobby?*

Like with all culture differences, I did have different ideals to many of the traditional Swedish exhibitors, because of the grading and critiquing system. They believe a good dog should win even if he's not shown very well. If the judge knows and critiques all dogs properly, he still finds the best specimen of the breed. Where as in Ireland I found you had a distinct advantage if the dog was shown very well.

*What was your initial impression of the quality of dogs in Sweden and did you decide to import any dogs when you began to form an opinion in this area?*

When I look at all breeds I think that there are many breeds in Sweden that are very strong, e.g. Poodles, Flat Coated Retriever (definitely the best in the world), very high standard of Sight hounds and the Terrier group is very strong in Sweden as well, most notably perhaps the Cairn Terrier. In my own breed – the Rottweiler – my initial impression was that I would have liked them to have better head type when I compared to what we had in Ireland. But then, in order to judge the differences between Ireland and Sweden, you have to look at the culture differences. In Ireland, the Rottweiler from a breeding perspective is primarily a show dog. In Sweden (from the breeding view) the Rottweiler is primarily a working dog that shows. But then there are other factors which took me a while to appreciate. In Sweden there are 5 basics to which the breeding program is based, and these 5 basics are strongly encouraged by both the Swedish Kennel Club and The Swedish Rottweiler Club.

1. Health (hips and elbows)
2. Mentality (variation of mental tests)
3. Working ability (To a high level of working)
4. Anatomy (confirmation, ability to move)
5. Breed characteristics (Type/exterior description test which basically checks all the breed characteristics described by the standard)

With such a heavy load you begin to understand why some of the top dogs maybe not be appreciated in countries that only look for beauty. With this in mind I have taken many dogs from both Ireland and England in order to improve on the type. Nowadays some 12 years on with many people importing, especially from central Europe where the culture is closer to Sweden, the quality of type is far better but still maintaining a high standard in the four other areas.



Ger had a phenomenal amount of success handling the Rottweiler **Multi CH Rottrivers Gaston** for Anna Greta Nordstedt and he is seen here at one of the main Swedish Shows of the year where he he was Michael Forte's Group winner.



Ger is much in demand for his handling expertise. Pictured here at work with a couple of the many classes he runs throughout Europe



*Would you think there is a more professionally based exhibitor in Scandinavia given the higher entry fees and the possibility of travelling further and visiting more countries to exhibit their dogs?*

I think the serious Scandinavian breeders and exhibitor views their breed more internationally on the bases that so many countries are available to travel to. In Ireland, when I was growing up, I always felt that many people were overshadowed by England and rarely looked beyond it. To say that they are more professional I don't fully agree as it is primarily a hobby in Scandinavia also. Scandinavia in general take in an extremely large number of foreign judges to judge the breeds and groups, this of course brings a broad perspective to many breeds.

*I was in the company of a well known Swedish all rounder once on a judging appointment in Sweden and as a dog was being exhibited and moved for the judge to assess it he remarked that the dog was being moved too fast and that this was the fault of one of my countrymen who he then told me was you! The message was that you had thought this exhibitor you train to move their dogs a little too fast! Does it surprise you that significant people such as this judge would see you as being so influential in the show presentation and handling of dogs?*

I cannot comment on the dog and exhibitor in question, it's

something I will take note in for the future. My intention was never to have such a large influence to handling in Scandinavia, but arriving in Sweden and having spent so long in the military I felt this was an area where I could gain some pocket money. It has now grown into a full-time job in which I take influences from both cultures (Ireland/Sweden). Today in Scandinavia I have over 5000 customers per year, not to mention many more throughout Europe, so at that customer base I guess there must be some influence on the handling of dogs.

*There has been a lot of talk about whether the Irish Show scene could sustain a system similar to that in Sweden regarding the full critiquing of exhibits at shows. What do you think would be the benefits for the Irish exhibitor if this system was to be adopted in Ireland?*

The simple fact is it gives you an opportunity to understand more clearly as to why you win or loose. Personally having experienced it for 12 years I'm in favour of a full critique and grading system. In some countries they will even ask you to place every dog in the class, maybe from 1-20, give an open critique on the class giving the exhibitor an overview as to how you judge and what you place value in. This I believe is particularly useful to beginners because not only are they competing; it is an opportunity to be educated as well. The system, if employed properly, forces the judge to examine every dog in the class rather than just a chosen few. This in turn will help to create integrity and a better sense of fair play. And why not be able to develop the system, as everything has developed so well in Ireland in recent years. If a country as small as Norway or Finland can achieve this, then definitely Ireland can!

*Some of us in the show scene in Ireland are privileged enough to get to visit Sweden to judge on a regular basis. How does Swedish exhibitors' opinions of judges coming from Ireland appear to you?*

It's true that coming from Ireland many exhibitors have a tendency to discuss their experience of Irish judges with me. As if they believe I can give them an insight into what they did or didn't do. It seems like the breeds in which Ireland are strong in, such as terriers, the Irish judges are very popular. As with any country, when people don't do so well they're not happy with the judging. Perhaps the largest complaint that I hear is not enough explanation in the critiques and many believe that



Ger uses every possible technique to get his point across in his anatomy seminar. He is seen here during one of his talks in Rome.

Irish and English judges are too soft with their grading; almost everything is very good. On a popular note, Irish judges seem to be very well liked among ring secretaries and stewards for being so courteous, easy to work with and ready for a joke at all times.

There are a number of all-round judges who visit Scandinavia regularly that are very well respected for their overall knowledge in judging, and how they apply the system. Judges that come to mind where I have heard many exhibitors compliment on their good work are Michael Forte, Seamus Oates and John Walsh.

*With the number of judges from Ireland qualifying to judge abroad growing all the time in this time of full FCI membership, has it caused any interesting situation for you as an exhibitor in Sweden?*

This is an easy answer for me! To the best of my memory, I've only exhibited one time for an Irish judge in 12 Years in Sweden, and that was while handling a St. Bernhard under Michael Forte. One other occasion was when an Irish judge was judging a group, and I was lucky to win the breed.

It feels a little uncomfortable to me as the dog world is no longer a hobby, but how I earn my living. I feel it's very important, especially here in Sweden to be seen to have integrity and not to give people anymore to talk about than absolutely necessary.

*Have you judged in Sweden and were there complications arising as an Irish judge living in Sweden?*

Yes, I have judged at every level in Sweden and no, there were no complications for an Irish judge to judge in Sweden. Once you're an FCI-qualified judge you can judge in any FCI-country.

*You've been back to Ireland to judge on a number of occasions since your move to Sweden, do you feel the Swedish experience has changed your perspective on the show scene in Ireland and on the exhibitor here?*

No, my perspective is the same and I want to believe that my view of exhibitors is equal. But of course having experienced showing and judging, not only in Sweden but many other countries, has altered how I view judging.

*Did you give verbal critiques on your judging appointments in Ireland and if so how did you think it was received by the exhibitor?*



Ger gives a verbal critique at a breed specialty in Europe with microphone in use

Interestingly the view is very different from breed to breed. In breeds such as Boxers or Belgian Shepherds which I don't live with but I'm qualified to judge, my open critique was welcomed and many exhibitors expressed this afterwards.

But in my own breed which I have lived with for most of my life and been privileged to have judged all over the world, the open critique was received with mixed reactions. As to the logic of this, I don't need to explain why.

*What's next for Ger O'Shea in the world of dog shows and what plans do you have for the business?*

In the world of showing dogs I believe I will continue to concentrate on my own breed – the Rottweiler – because of international competitions that are available to me. There is a great challenge in staying even closer to the top. A great personal goal would be to one day have a Multi Group- and BIS-winning, long tailed Rottweiler.

Plans for the business are huge! I have entered into many new projects that will involve international partnerships to expand the business on a multimedia base, e.g. TV, DVD, Books and Magazines!

Show Dogs Ireland Magazine thanks Ger for taking the time out from his extremely busy schedule to talk to us and we look forward to seeing him back in Ireland soon and hopefully bringing his great knowledge and expertise in his chosen field to exhibitors in Ireland. We will keep our readers up to date with the progress in this area and we look forward to having Ger as a contributor to the Magazine in future issues.

