



One dog's journey to the 2011 Westminster Dog Show.

Cathy Gallagher of Algonquin, Illinois, is on an interesting journey this weekend. Her dog Winston has been invited to participate in the 2011 Westminster Dog Show on February 14-15 at the Madison Square Garden in New York City. The Westminster Kennel Club invites the top five US Show Champion dogs in each breed, and also accepts dogs based on show achievements.

It is not surprising that Winston has been invited to participate in the 2011 Westminster Dog Show. By three years old, he had been awarded several Best in Breeds as well as many Sporting Group placements, three of which were first place.

Winston is currently ranked as the #13 Grand Champion Vizsla in the US and in Lifetime rankings by AKC. Gallagher says, "When he was just over a year old, he achieved Conformation Show Champion title. Since I was handling him in the show ring, he won his title in a class called Bred by Exhibitor, which made it particularly exciting for me as the owner and breeder of such a beautiful boy. Last summer, he won Best of Breed at our Vizsla Club of Illinois Specialty Show, with more than 50 Vizslas competing."

In 2010, the American Kennel Club launched a new title called the AKC Grand Champion. "These are champion dogs who continue to show in the ring and compete with other dogs in the Sporting Group to become Best in Show."

By fall of 2010, Winston was one of ten Vizslas in the country that had achieved AKC's new Grand Champion title. Being ranked in the top 25 Vizslas in the country, he received an invitation to show in early December at the 2010 Eukanuba National Dog Show in Long Beach, California.

But Gallagher had a vision. "Although this invitation was really an honor, I had a lifetime goal – to compete with one of my Vizslas in the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, the most prestigious dog show in the country. In mid-December of 2010, we learned that Winston's application to compete was accepted.

"We are so excited. Winston and I will be joined by three very dear friends: Robyn Doescher, who owns Winston's brother Denver and half brother Indy; Denni Hughes, who owns Winston's niece Kinzy; and Jo Reynolds who owns a distant cousin, Miss Galuska. Winston will be shown by his dog handler, Christine Hajek."

Gallagher has always owned dogs, and admits they are a huge part of both her life and happiness. She has raised a Lhasa Apso, two Labrador Retrievers, and for the past thirteen years has been totally devoted to Vizslas.

"I was first attracted to Vizslas because of their elegance of movement, high level of intelligence, eagerness to learn and please, and their sweet, loving dispositions," says Gallagher. "Vizslas are very smart and playful, extremely interested in pleasing their owners and being included as an integral part of family life. They love to learn, so it makes training great fun. It is important with such a smart breed of dog to engage not only their bodies but their minds. We are consummate students together – agility, obedience, rally obedience, hunting, show and even dancing. My girl Jolie loves music, especially Latin music, so we have taken some Dancing with Dogs workshops."

Gallagher decided to enter competitions in 1999, with her first Vizsla, Kiva, who "pranced out of the womb. It was clear to me at only ten weeks old that Kiva was a show girl, and so after her six-month birthday, we entered Conformation or show classes. She was a natural, and achieved her Championship title at about fifteen months old. Kiva and my first Vizsla boy, Kola, achieved their Champion titles in the show ring, as well as their Hunt titles and numerous Agility titles."

Most of the Vizslas raised by Gallagher have earned Conformation show titles and Junior Hunter titles. Some of her dogs have entered Rally Obedience competition, and two of the dogs, Jenna and Winston, are also Service Dogs in training.

Although Kiva was Gallagher's first dog to achieve Conformation Champion show title, Kalei was truly the star show girl, achieving Championship title when she was only nine months old. "At six months and one day old, she took Best of Breed

over all of the older dogs and many finished Champions, and she was awarded Best in Show puppy!” It was Kalei that helped Gallagher see the difference between a talented show dog and a true Grand Champion. “She was amazing in the ring. She floated with her head high and when the audience clapped, she knew it must be for her.”

Kalei is now retired from the Show Ring, so it gives Gallagher great pleasure that Kalei’s nephew Winston is following in her ‘pawsteps.’

Training for competition starts at about three days old. Good breeders begin to sensitize and socialize all of their puppies at a very early age with the rule of seven: seven different surfaces, ages of people, sounds, types of food and snacks, physical locations, heat and light sources, and so on. Puppy training and beginner obedience class begin at an early age as well. Gallagher knows it is important to socialize. “We integrate the puppies into our lives as true family members, feed them the best food, provide the best veterinary care, and use positive training methods. We love them!”

Vizslas, especially the males, are an incredibly sensitive breed, very attuned to their people and to the environment. Even the most socialized dogs can get stressed in competition, which can be attributed to what they read from their owners and handlers. “It is important for people to stay calm. Negativity is not good, even when not directed at the dogs. Loud or strange noises can spook them. Winston has learned that the show is really a safe place. He particularly loves clapping and cheering. He responds well to rest before the show and to soothing aromas, and so the handlers use essential oils. He is better in the afternoon when he wakes up and when he is familiar with the surroundings.”

Gallagher can tell if Winston is stressed because “his tail is not up, his ears are down, and he has that concerned look in his eyes. When he is relaxed and confident, he holds his head high, gaits with confidence – light footed and graceful is his norm – and he wags his tail. He even smiles.”

Gallagher has a special routine to help Winston ready himself for competition because “it’s all about the dog” staying calm and focused.

“He gets ongoing exercise just by playing with other dogs, and a local dog walker, Krista from Four Legs Pets, takes him jogging and power walking four days a week.

“I file his nails and give him a bath one or two days before the competition. Excellent food such as chicken, string cheese, even filet mignon is prepared, and he gets a good sleep the night before and on the ride to the show – thankfully, he loves the car.”

Gallagher and Winston arrive at least one hour before competition to greet Team Chris. They have a special crate for him, his show lead, and an aromatherapy mist called *Canine Calm* which helps him stay relaxed, alert, and focused on both his job and his handler.

As show time approaches, Gallagher gives Winston a quick brush with the rubber mitt and buffs his nails with a little cream “for look and for luck. Then I carefully place my ringside chair where he does not see me immediately, but he can do the drive-by smile.”

Once the treats go into the handler’s right pocket, it’s show time. “As Winston and Chris enter the ring they are very serious but happy. While they wait for the judge to examine Winston’s conformation, Chris talks with him, plays with him and teases him with the chicken. After the judge takes a good look and he is taking his final lap around the ring, I clap and cheer with a loud ‘whoo-whoo!’

“I will never forget the drive-by smile that he flashed me as I sat ringside in Rosemont, Illinois, during the Sporting Group competition in December 2010. It was precious and many spectators and handlers in the ring caught it and laughed softly. Although he was not awarded a Group Placement that day, he did make the judge’s first cut, and we were so proud of his sweet disposition and happy with his performance! He is very focused on his work, shows beautifully every time, and adores Chris, his handler. But he loves to know that Mommie is watching him and clapping for him.”

