

## Dances with Dogs

An interview with Joan Tennille and Gaea Mitchel of Canine Freestyle Federation.

By Paulette Callen for Grey Muzzle [www.greymuzzle.org](http://www.greymuzzle.org)

**GM:** If you could pick one word to describe your experience/feeling in this sport, what would it be?

**Gaea Mitchel:** Joy.



**Joan Tennille:** JOY. It is the only word. I have used this word from the beginning in 1993. My first seminar, actually the first freestyle seminar in the world, in Sept. '94 was titled "The Joy of Freestyle." I used and still use this word because there is a high degree of gratification and gives a sense of pleasure to spectators and to the team members, the Dog and the Handler. It has been my perception that the effect is a lasting one. My first freestyle dog, Claire, died 6 years ago. She was 16, and still individuals will talk about her animation and how her performance delighted them. They always describe her circling tail as something expressing her joy.

**GM: While anybody can train their dog to dance for their own fun and pleasure, are**



**mixed**

**breeds welcome in competition?**

**GM:** We have several mixed breed dogs that have been very successful in CFF competition. They are indeed welcome!

**JT:** Yes, we have always had mixed breeds involved. When I developed the rules in 1994 my objective was and still is, to develop a competitive event and training discipline that encompassed all dogs and all handlers with minimal or no restrictions. Presently there are 2 Level IV dogs of mixed heritage. They are remarkable dogs. Breezy is still young while Itchi [shown right at 9 years old], is definitely a bit grey around the muzzle. He will be competing for his championship in Chattanooga this weekend and he is showing at both the Sat and Sun show. There are 4 presently training with CFF in Minnesota.

**GM: These dogs seem to be so happy doing this...more so than the agility or show dogs...is there something unique about this sport that makes them so much more joyful?**

**GM:** There is a great deal of communication between dog and handler, and it is not penalized. Quiet voice commands and encouragement are allowed, as are hand signals and other body language. The dog gets a voice in the choice of music, and often the best bits of choreography are things the dog offered instead of what the handler asked for. It truly is a partnership.

**JT:** There is definitely something unique with CFF Training. It starts with our definition and it continues through our training discipline and it is incorporated into our judging guidelines and protocols.

1. Dog must be treated with honor and respect. (included in the definition)
2. The focus of a freestyle performance is first the dog, then the team, but never the handler. (The CFF Rulebook)
3. Movement is the medium for technical execution and artistic expression in Canine Freestyle. (Judging Guidelines). CFF defines movement as the dog's movement enhanced by the handler's creating visually pleasing movement designs/shapes within the presentation space. (Definition, Rulebook, and Judging Protocols and Guidelines).
4. In order to artistically express the team as an image of one, the handler and the dog must be willing and responsive to one another. Their mutual trust is evident in the balance and harmony of their choreographed movement designs. The essence of Canine Freestyle is expressing the delight they have in working and training together and then through their performance sharing it with others.

5. Canine Freestyle requires a dog and a handler. Each must be trained and each is ½ of a whole, together they make a new entity, the TEAM. The Canine Freestyle Federation accepts this as a definition of team and as such they cannot perform, train or create alone. They basically need one another. To my knowledge no other discipline defines the team as we do.
6. From my own experience and perceptions, as the originator of Canine Freestyle, an instructor, choreographer, and as an exhibiter every dog has been equal to the human in creating, training, choreographing. They are inventive and innovative and there is balance and harmony with their human counterpart's imaginative ideas. The result is a unique celebration of "dog work."
7. Everything I have written above builds the mutual trust which is evident in our presentations. CFF's training discipline establishes trust as one of the keys to learning and creating. This is IMO why CFF dogs are always joyful. I'm not certain that I would say our dogs are more joyful than Agility dogs, but if they are I believe it would be the result of the training approach designed and used exclusively by CFF. CFF has the only training method designed for Canine Freestyle. It includes training for technical execution and artistic expression for performance and creative exercises to enable all exhibitors to create their own choreography.

**GM: What has your experience been working with senior dogs in this sport?**

**GM:** My older Rottweiler, Kadja, had a bit of basic obedience as a youngster, but she was primarily a conformation dog until the age of five. At that time I retired her from the breed ring, and began to work toward her novice obedience and rally titles. I also began to work with her to music, and she really blossomed! I had a hard time trusting her, as she didn't seem nearly as reliable as the dogs I have worked with consistently since puppyhood. At our first titling event we worked our way through the routine, and suddenly I realized we had arrived at the closing movements. She had been with me the entire way, attention riveted on me. I had to apologize for doubting her! As she ages, she just keeps getting better.

**JT:** I have worked with a great many senior dogs. If we carefully condition the older dog to begin to work again and adjust the training technically to build on the things he does best and choreograph to maximize his strengths and minimize the areas age has compromised he will be ready to "dance." CFF also has a non-regular class for veteran dogs. The dogs must be over the age of 7. There are no required movements and the music duration is 1:30 to 3:00. There are no scores given they are presently just placed. In November of this year Veterans Class exhibitors will also receive an award of merit honoring them for their contribution in the celebration of "dog work." The movement vocabulary is developed from class work and the choreography focuses on his best attributes. He will not be over-faced nor will he be treated disrespectfully. He will be honored and loved for his grey muzzle and the grey in his coat, the brightness of his clouded eyes and the joyful swing of his tail. The choreography will communicate the wonder of their journey together. Not only the ones they have done in the past but the one, he and his partner will continue to have after this. From my observations when we follow this methodology the dog is animated, joyful and fully enjoys working once again.

**GM: Have you worked with senior dogs who began in the sport as an older dog? Or did they all start as younger dogs?**

**GM:** The rest of my girls have started as young dogs.

**JT:** In a manner of speaking, one could say this sport was designed for the older dog. I introduced the sport of Canine Freestyle in October 1993. There were 5 choreographed

presentations. I choreographed 4 and wrote a definition as an explanation of my 4 choreographed works. ...my choreography was developed for 3 dogs all past the age of 10. The definition I wrote to explain my choreography is used by CFF as the basis for the rules and our judging criteria as well as our training discipline. The objective of Canine Freestyle is to show the dog to his best advantage in a creative and artistic manner. This is the demonstration that established Canine Freestyle. Our rules are intended for all dogs above the age of 1 year. They can be trained at any age but the movement vocabulary and performance will be different with the older dog.

**GM: If you started training with a senior dog, did you notice a change in his/her demeanor or behavior or level of health and well-being?**

**GM:** As I said, the rest of them started young. However, my Cavalier had a stroke at the age of six and a half. She was blind on one side and unable to keep her feet under her. I'm convinced that the body condition she gained through freestyle gave her a head start on her rehabilitation, and it was the spins, laterals and backing movements that I used to help her get back on her feet. Six months after the stroke PeliAnn and I performed in a demo at the Cavalier national specialty, and no one would have believed that she ever had a problem.

**JT:** Dogs in training exhibit different behaviors than when they are not training. If the training is positive and the dog is treated with honor and respect they will exhibit more animation and focus. The length of the training sessions should be of short duration and the work needs to be trained and rewarded in a timely manner. The training sessions should progress in time and in difficulty based on the dog's response and his work ethic. Some dogs do not have a work ethic. You must learn to read your dog. CFF training includes how to observe and read your dog. The older dog exhibits similar behavior to the youngster both need different approaches to duration and progressions.

**GM: Is there an age when one probably shouldn't start a new regimen of training such as free style? Or does it depend on overall physical health?**

**GM:** I think it depends totally on the health and attitude of the dog. PeliAnn showed me that, if there is the will to do the work, it can be a valuable part of a conditioning program. With CFF freestyle, the required moves are very broad. We can do them in the way that is most comfortable for each dog, so that age needn't be a big issue. Probably the harder part is getting an older dog without prior experience to feel the enthusiasm for any sort of training.

**JT:** Dogs are all different. A great deal is dependent on the dog's environment and his relationship to his owner. Do they play together, take walks, etc. In any case, I would recommend seeing the dog's veterinarian. He is aware of the dog's physical condition to determine if the dog can begin this activity. He might even suggest any limitations such as jumping, backing, or standing on hind legs to name a few precautions.

**GM: When working with an older dog, do you give any supplements to keep him limber? Any other special care (acupuncture, chiropractor, etc.)**

**GM:** My older dogs are on a glucosamine and chondroitin supplement. Other than that, I have not felt they need anything more an occasional massage (very amateur, as I have no training in that area).

**JT:** Again I would refer to the veterinarian. As an organization and as an instructor, we do not make choices relative to supplements etc. Our training program is designed to maintain a level of conditioning that is exceptional. Each dog is trained in movement on both sides of his body and relative to given reference positions on the handler. We strive to bring each dog to his

highest potential by training his body to move in a natural and organic manner. Dr. Sue Ann Lesser in her book, "Why Dogs should Dance" recommends CFF training as it produces the best conditioned dogs in performance activities.

### **GM: Who choreographs your routines? Does your dog have a say in it?**

**GM:** I start out with some ideas of movements that I want to showcase, but if I am asking the dog to do something that she isn't eager to do I change to something else that fits the feeling of the piece that she likes to do. Sometimes she will just do something that is so appropriate to the music and the focus of the choreography, and I always consider how to use those movements.

**JT:** As I stated previously, I designed our training program to be approached technically, artistically, and creatively. We train, as most dog trainers, using positive methods, by rewarding the behavior wanted with food, word, toy or click. However, we take it a step further by teaching choreographic and movement concepts as well. We call this conceptual training. Each class is built on a concept or concepts and not on a specific exercise, trick or step. The class time is divided into 3 parts with a training concept as the focus and it is addressed technically, artistically, and creatively. Training, in this manner, and experiencing the concept through movement and discussion of creative work leads to developing the oneness of the team and effectively communicates the "joy" of Canine Freestyle in performance. Each team thrives on their individuality, never imitative; simply different and unique. (I say this after observing students and dogs creating their own choreography for 16 years.)

I seem to have produced/designed an activity part art form and part test to earn a reward. A reward both the human and the canine thoroughly enjoy. I don't know whether the reward is the title and patch or the wonder of their own creation. What I do know is what the students and CFF members tell me. Each time they train or perform

1. The mutual trust becomes stronger and the tie between dog and handler increases.
2. There is greater non-verbal communication between the two. Training is more inventive, imaginative, and interesting and the team's movement vocabulary increases.
3. The "fun" they have in creating the choreography.
4. The "joy" they have when they have successfully shared with others the depth and joy of their relationship.

If they are effective and successful in performance they will also communicate the joy of owning and training a dog. In sharing their training journey they are effectively inviting others to join in the fun. And Yes, it is hard. However, to quote Tom Hanks in "A League of Their Own" It's supposed to be hard. If it wasn't hard, everyone would do it. It's the hard that makes it great."

Yes, we train each exhibiter to choreograph with music synchronized to the dog's natural rhythm to show the dog is the motivation and the focus.

### **GM: What do you use as rewards?**

**GM:** In teaching a new movement, I use a lot of food. Once a dog knows what I'm asking for, I fade the food but of course continue with the praise. That's a reward I can take into the freestyle competition space, and my dogs love to be told how beautiful and brilliant they are! Some of my girls have enjoyed playing tug with a toy.

**JT:** Rewards are: The handler's touch voice or gesture, smile or clap of hands etc. Food, soft food if you reward "on the go" and continue the work, i.e., string cheese, salmon anything that can be swallowed without chewing to allow the dog to continue to work. Jackpots for exceptional work or completion of a special performance. This can be any and all possibilities, chicken, steak etc. Toys and play are also good rewards. If you are a clicker trainer the click is also the reward

meaning food is coming. I also believe that we are the greatest reward for the dog our delight and pleasure of his companionship feeds and rewards both of us. This is the only reward when one is competing at a show. It's just you and the dog in that empty space.

### **GM: How has this changed your relationship with your dog?**

**GM:** The more I do freestyle, the closer we seem to become. I have done obedience for years, as well as agility more recently, and both help to build the relationship between us. However, I never felt the strength of the bond that I have with my freestyle dogs. It's as if we get into each other's minds.

**JT:** I have trained and competed in many disciplines in the sport of dogs. In each the relationship between the dog and myself developed and grew. Canine Freestyle opened a whole new door relative to the animal and human relationship. It is amazing to me when I sense and feel the depth of the relationship between my dog and myself. It is present almost constantly. Each time we perform it becomes greater. We are one in thought as we move together. It is an unbelievable experience. My students have shared their feelings with me and we all agree the bond between the handler and the dog in Canine Freestyle is deeper and its intensity dynamically communicates this to audiences. Apparently the "relationship change" happens in class when the handler is trained to adapt stride length and tempo to the dog's gait and rhythm. From our class discussions and observations, everyone present sees it happen and there is a very definite change. The dog suddenly looks at the handler in a new way and everything changes body image, movement and dynamics. The entire image of the two becomes larger and (my word) they glow. The picture of the two changes completely, you have to see it to believe it and it happens every time. In our protocols for judging we call it interactive-attention.

### **GM: What advice would you give to others wanting to try freestyle?**

**GM:** To coin a phrase, Just Do It! Find a seminar, or a freestyle guild, go to the Canine Freestyle Federation website and start learning from the videos and the e-book.

**JT:** Be prepared to change your perceptions of training. If you approach training for freestyle through movement as combinations of movement, the combinations possible are endless. The defining of team is part of that perception. Canine Freestyle is a visual experience. Individuals understand almost from the beginning that they cannot see themselves or their dogs they can feel and sense how they are moving but only others can tell them what they are showing or seeing. Canine Freestyle develops a supporting and trusting group guiding and assisting others to train and choreograph and perform. This is also a unique quality to CFF training. Finally adapting to the dog's rhythm, from my observations, improves the handler's timing and aids in training.

### **GM: Why are senior dogs important to you?**

**GM:** I love the comfortable familiarity of the older dog, knowing what they like and how they think. There is a clear, open look in their faces and a light in their eyes. Growing older together is such a treasure.

**JT:** The dog is with us for such a short time every moment is precious. Elaine Smith, a student said, "Every moment with them is to be cherished and remembered with love." Canine Freestyle is an expression of that loving relationship. Joy is defined as an emotion evoked by a high degree of gratification and gives pleasure. Canine Freestyle uses the word "joy" because each presentation showcases the joy and delight of the team working and training together and each presentation to be successful involves the spectator into the training journey of that team. This journey emphasizes the value of the older dog to our discipline. They are remembered by the

stories of their journeys, as part of the Hall of Fame, as the 4 original dog's, as CFF champions, they are remembered by name more than their human counterpart.

**GM: Can any breed do this? Do some breeds enjoy it more than others?**

**GM:** Yes, any breed can do CFF freestyle. We strive to present each dog to its best advantage, emphasizing the traits that help to express the dog's personality and positive qualities. As with any training discipline, some dogs are easier to motivate than others, and there are breeds that seem less willing to engage in the handler's games. A motivated dog of any breed should enjoy the sport.

**JT:** I have never met a dog that did not thoroughly enjoy the work involved in Canine Training. I have found handlers who do not wish to attempt this discipline.

**GM: Is Canine Freestyle dancing an expensive sport?**

**GM:** There is no expensive equipment to buy. The main expense I incur is traveling to titling events, seminars and other training opportunities. If you can participate regularly with a guild, there is a lot of help and support for a minimal cost, usually just a portion of the expense to rent a training space.

**JT:** Actually no. Membership in CFF is \$25 a year. As a member the educational/ training parts are included on the website under "members only" in addition there is also the CFF learning center and the forum. Show entries are \$25. The Handler is attired in clothes to complement the dog and the dog is to be neat and clean. Plus we offer a number of services relative to music and creative assistance which are available for minimal cost. Finally, you do not have to be a member to enter a show nor to have your records archived relative to earning titles or awards be registered. Our records beginning 1993 to the present are all recorded and all performances demos and shows are now on DVD.

**GM: Can someone begin who has never trained a dog before?**

**GM:** Yes, though it will probably go more slowly than for an experienced trainer. However, the value of the working relationship and communication with your canine partner is priceless.

**JT:** Yes. I have taught 2 by just using Canine Freestyle techniques and 1 is now showing at our top level IV.

**GM: What is the most rewarding thing for you in this sport?**

**GM:** Tough question. Perhaps a tie between the building of the relationship with my dog, and the camaraderie within the Canine Freestyle Federation community.

**JT:** The dogs and the unique look/attitude, their joy. It truly feeds my creativity and my passion for this amazing discipline.

**GM: The most surprising?**

**GM:** That I can walk onto the performance space and not die of stage fright! Because CFF freestyle is about presenting the dog, the handler has only a supportive role and should not dance. I am simply there to show off my dog.

**JT:** The dogs and how creative and articulate they really are.

**GM: Do older dog do better than the youngsters? Perhaps they are steadier and more completely bonded? Are there advantages to working with older dog?**

**GM:** Again, it depends on the dog. In order to look best, the dog should move with drive and enthusiasm. If the senior dog has a good attitude, often the deeper bond does give an advantage.

**JT:** I can't really say. I never ask about the age unless there is some movement that draws my attention. Sometimes the dog will tell me but they don't talk in ages as we do Sorry.

**GM: Have any deaf dogs ever performed?**

**GM:** Not that I know of, but a dog that works well on hand signals should do fine.

**JT:** Yes, there have been several once we find the dog's rhythm everything clicks. Even if they are deaf they definitely always remember their music. Now that's one I cannot explain, possibly just like human deaf person; they sense the beat through the floor, I have taught deaf children to dance and create their own choreography and that's how they were successfully created and danced their choreography.

**GM: Any other comments/observations you wish to make relative to Canine Freestyle as a sport for older dogs?**

**GM:** Freestyle is a relatively low impact activity, so that dogs can continue to train and compete well into their senior years. And Canine Freestyle Federation titling events usually offer a Veterans class, with no required moves and a shorter time requirement. This allows us to continue to give the senior dog the attention and mental and physical stimulation of preparing for a show while avoiding any movements that may have become uncomfortable for the dog. As with humans, staying active in body and mind maintains or improves the quality of life for our canine partners.

**JT:** As you can tell I am just a bit passionate about Canine Freestyle. CFF has grown considerably since I introduced it in 1993. Our rules and judging protocols have stood the test of time. The training discipline also has not really changed since I introduced Canine Freestyle choreographically in '93 and the training discipline shortly after. I have been teaching Canine Freestyle since 1993. I have taught and given seminars since 1994. It has taken 15 years to get it on paper with video assistance and guidance to enable individuals to train alone or in small groups without an actual instructor. This is an ongoing project of which I am quite pleased and excited. Thank you for approaching us with your questions and I hope we have been helpful.

**Thank you, Joan and Gaea!**