

A veteran Grand Champion Beagle returns to the ring to help a Junior find her way.

By Lindsey Dobruck

Sofia's Journey

Journey was a handsome show dog, owner Debra Metcalf says, but he'd much rather be in your lap.

This was on full display at the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship, where Journey was invited to compete against the nation's top-ranked Beagles.

As the judge slowly strode past the lineup, examining the dogs before making his selection, handlers knelt beside their Beagles, positioning the head and tail in a perfect stack.

Journey had other plans.

"He'd just get in my lap and I had to keep pushing him back out!" Metcalf recalls, laughing.

Journey had the good looks and impressive structure to be competitive in conformation, but he didn't have that "look at me!" attitude that makes a show dog shine. "He took a little bit of skill to show him," Metcalf explains. "You had to kind of massage it out of him." He earned a Grand Championship and an early retirement.

Until, at 8 years old and far removed from his show career, Journey met a pint-sized Pee Wee handler named Sofia Eaton.

A Second Act

Unlike many young handlers in the Juniors ring, the Eaton sisters did not come from a dog show background.

Sofia's mom, Jocelyn, had been involved with Great Dane rescue for years, and



older sister Izzy took an interest in showing Danes when a friend introduced her to the sport. After watching her big sister compete, Sofia was inspired to try it, too—she just needed a dog to show.

Metcalf, who's taught handling classes for more than 40 years, knows potential when she sees it. She also knows how young handlers can get discouraged from the sport early on if they don't have a well-trained partner to compete with.

"[Journey] was a good dog, and he was somebody that she could learn with," Metcalf says. He was a kind dog, one who loved children and could tolerate the sometimes clumsy maneuvering of a Pee Wee handler.

She brought the veteran Beagle to

handling class to meet Sofia.

"From the second I saw him, he was so happy. He ran up to me and was sniffing my face," she remembers. "He was wagging his tail. He was just the most happy thing with me."

Sofia, barely the same age as her seasoned canine partner, took him through the class and felt an instant connection.

"I just knew that this was the dog I wanted to show."

Pushing Buttons

The team debuted in Pee Wee, a noncompetitive class to prepare young handlers for Junior Showmanship. "She couldn't even hardly put him on the table," Metcalf recalls. "She couldn't



Twinning: Little Sofia was the same age as her veteran show dog when they debuted in the Pee Wee ring.



Now 14, Sofia has matured into an elegant handler whose Beagles compete at group level. Here she is with Ace, who is co-owned with Metcalf.

even look over his back. I mean, she had to look at his legs!”

As Sofia advanced to Junior Showmanship and got more comfortable in the ring, so did Journey—and he started to make his opinions about this show business known.

“Everybody thought because he was so old that he was going to be this push-button dog that I would just go in there and win with all the time,” Sofia says. “But he had so much attitude that he definitely was not push-button at all. He would always keep me on my toes, and he was definitely fresh.”

But Sofia was patient with Journey, Metcalf says. She faithfully brought him to every handling class and entered every show to gain more experience—and to understand her canine teammate.

“She blew me away. She has such presence and such instinct,” Metcalf says. “She’s very kind and gentle. And she’s learned from Journey, because he wasn’t the easiest dog.”

This reluctance can be typical of the breed—some label Beagles as stubborn, but Metcalf calls them “opportunists.”

“They have to understand you, you have to understand them,” she explains. Beagles are jolly, uncomplicated companions who love their families, especially

children. “They want to be your friend; they want to be with you. They’re curious about what you do. They love to go to places with you.”

Journey, despite his sometimes curmudgeonly behavior in the ring, still exemplified that happy-go-lucky Beagle temperament.

“He always had that fun personality, even though he was so old,” Sofia says. “... If he saw a rabbit in the yard or a bird, he would definitely go and chase it. He did all the things that a Beagle should do.”

The Journey Ahead

In Junior Showmanship, young handlers are judged on their handling ability, rather than how the dog conforms to his breed standard. Large, flashy breeds may attract a judge’s attention, but for Sofia, Beagles offer a better presentation of skill.

Metcalf compares showing a Beagle to driving a manual car. “The big dogs are like an automatic. If you train them well enough, they’re going to stop and stand correctly all the time,” she explains.

“... A Beagle is like a standard. You have to get down on your knees, you have to bring the head up over their shoulders, and you have to bring that tail up.”

Learning to coax Journey into performing on days he didn’t feel like

showing helped Sofia mature into a thoughtful, problem-solving handler.

“[Journey] helped me learn how to deal with different situations in the ring,” she says.

Now, at 14, Sofia has added two Beagles to her pack—Ace, whom she co-owns with Metcalf, and Neil. The local Beagle community has embraced the young handler, and she is a regular fixture in the breed ring. Another Beagle puppy will be joining Sofia’s family soon, whom she hopes will be competitive at group level. She has even contributed to breed rescue efforts by fostering a Beagle as he transitioned to his forever home.

Journey, the veteran show dog who opened the doors of the fancy to an eager young girl, died in July of this year at the age of 14.

In a touching tribute posted to Facebook, Sofia bid a heartfelt goodbye to her first canine partner. “Journey, you have no idea how much you changed my life,” Sofia wrote. “Thank you for all the amazing memories. You will always be the dog that built me!” **FD**

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