



TAKING THE LEAD

At these local kennel clubs, kids run the show.

By Lindsey Dobruck

The evening before the November 2023 match, junior handler Emerson Jaquish was already feeling accomplished.

The newly formed [Arizona Sunset Juniors Club](#) collaborated for months on their first event as a club—a sanctioned B match, with breed judging, Junior Showmanship, rally, obedience, and Canine Good Citizen testing.

The members, ranging in age from 5 to 21, helped in whatever ways they could. Jaquish's friend Kira found judges to volunteer for the match. Her little

Courtesy: Ringkita Brands



AKC Junior Club members share their vision boards, illustrating what they hope to achieve with their canine partners. Club leader McKenna's board is blank—Emily Fish says, “It was a funny moment of her saying she’s done it all!”

brother, Griffin, made signs to promote the event. Other members solicited vendors for raffle items, learned to ring steward, filed the paperwork to host the match, and found a show secretary.

As the kids set up for the event the night before, Jaquish felt a sense of pride and a closer bond with her fellow club members.

“Everybody came together to prepare this match that we had spent months trying to put together,” Jaquish says. “And it just kind of gave me a feeling of wow, we did this. We put this on and it felt great to know that we had accomplished something like that.”

One of just two youth-led AKC clubs in the country, the Arizona Sunset Juniors Club helps young handlers learn what it means to be part of the greater dog show community.

“It’s just like an all-breed club with AKC,

except the members are younger,” says Pamela Peat, president of the [Scottsdale Dog Fanciers Association](#) in Arizona. “They have written their own constitution and bylaws. They have elected their own officers.”

But it’s not all work and no play—for club president Jaquish, 18, a main goal is camaraderie.

“We want to take out that competitiveness and just bring all these kids together, let them have friends,” she says. “I want these kids to feel like they have an opportunity to have all these people who want to just help them. They have the opportunity to have these friends. I want them to all feel supported.”

Paving the Way

The blueprint for a junior-focused club came from AKC judge and 4-H leader Emily Fish, of Camas, Washington.

Fish came to the dog world through 4-H as a child, and she’s passionate about supporting youth in the sport. While 4-H excels in teaching handling and husbandry, Fish wanted a better way to involve kids in the greater dog community.

“I’m a big believer that we, as a dog community, need to replace ourselves,” Fish says. “And if we don’t have a person to replace ourselves, how are we going to go forward?”

In 2021 she approached the [Greater Clark County Kennel Club \(GCCCKC\)](#) with an idea: an all-breed kennel club for juniors, run by juniors, to expose them to the many different roles that make up the dog fancy. With the GCCCKC’s enthusiastic go-ahead, Fish worked with Mari-Beth O’Neill, AKC’s vice president of sport services, to form the first AKC Junior Club.



Left: Emily Fish and AKC Junior Club member Paige Kellis show off the ribbons they earned with Sunny, a Cardigan Welsh Corgi they co-own. Right: Oliver Skeen, 12, wanted to show dogs—but he had two cats and no canines. AKC judge Pamela Peat took Oliver under her wing and sold him his first show dog, an Affenpinscher, for \$10. “He’s our dog show grandchild,” she says.

The youth club operates under the GCCKC’s umbrella, but with their own officers and finances. They convene before the GCCKC’s meeting for club business and guest presentations. At one meeting, a vet tech walked the kids through a wellness exam. At another, the GCCKC president demonstrated carting with his Leonbergers.

Fish encourages the kids to set goals for themselves and their dogs using what they’ve learned from the speakers and activities. One year, the club made vision boards using magazine photos to illustrate their aspirations.

“I had one girl who had a Golden-doodle ... and her vision board—this just tickled me—was of a Papillon,” Fish says. “She had all this Papillon stuff and butterflies all over, and she’s like, ‘I just want

a Papillon. I want to be able to compete with a Papillon.’ Literally, that next year, she had her Papillon.” (The young handler has gone on to win Best Junior at all-breed shows and competes in agility.)

Twice a year, the club organizes a Junior Showcase for kids to try several AKC sports and programs—CGC, Farm Dog Certified, tricks, Fast CAT, Barn Hunt, junior handling, and more. The events draw kids from 4-H and the community into the world of AKC sports, and the young club members learn what it takes to put on a show or trial.

“They run their own showcase,” Fish says. “They plan the trophies, they go out to the community to help get stuff for the goodie bags. ... They help out with ring stewarding.”

Hosting and participating in their own

showcase has given many young handlers the confidence to compete alongside adults, and also help run GCCKC’s events.

“They’re so much less intimidated by doing it on their own, with each other, versus branching into the adult [club],” Fish says. “But now I have kids that are like, ‘Oh, do you need help with hospitality? OK, let’s go!’”

Gen AZ

Today, Fish works with O’Neill to consult with local kennel clubs on ways to support their juniors.

They connected with Peat, president of the Scottsdale Dog Fanciers Association, about forming a club using Fish’s model. Instead of recruiting kids from 4-H, the Arizona Sunset Juniors Club

started with a talented team of junior handlers coached by renowned trainer Jody Davidson.

The kids had well-established friendships through Davidson's mentorship, but taking part in the juniors club has integrated them into the larger dog community.

"A lot of the kids who are in the club have made personal connections to people within the Scottsdale club, and we hold our meeting right before theirs, at the same location," Jaquish says. "More than half of the kids who go to our juniors meeting stay for the Scottsdale meeting, because they are also a part of that club."

For 12-year-old Oliver Skeen, being a member of the Arizona Sunset Juniors Club has given him a greater appreciation for the work of an all-breed kennel club.

"In our club, they bring in people to talk to us about their certain breed," Oliver says. "And I think it's nice to know, behind the scenes, what it takes to put on a show, and learn other breeds as you're going along."

Since their initial match in 2023, the club has organized special programming at the Fiesta Dog Shows such as free



*Friendly Competition:
The Arizona juniors
support each other in
and out of the ring.*

luncheons, handling workshops, judge mentorship, and a Grand Best Junior competition. This year, the club arranged for a vet tech to give a seminar on first aid, and each attendee will receive a canine first aid kit purchased with money

from the club's raffles and garage sales.

"We don't have to do it. They do it. And when I say, 'They do it,' they do it," Peat emphasizes. "They organize it, they pick the menu, they figure out the activities, they raise the money to do it."

As club president, Jaquish hopes to plan more "extracurricular" activities—like their recent get-together at an indoor slide park—to help the members bond outside of the ring.

"You make friends, and you establish connections that you didn't know you needed," she says. "I just love that this club brings these kids together." **FD**

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*Summer Fun: The Arizona Sunset
Juniors Club beat the heat at an
indoor slide park to bond outside the
show ring.*

To start a juniors club in your area, contact AKC Vice President of Sport Services [Mari-Beth O'Neill](#).