



It's a bird! It's a plane! It's a spaniel,
flying through a course at Bon-Clyde
Learning Center in Sanford.



Class Act

Bonnie Buchanan's canine learning center in Sanford turns four-legged friends into thespians of renowned skills.

You've probably met women like Kernersville's Sherrie Johns. She dotes on her precious little one and brags on him relentlessly. She believes there's none cuter, none smarter, none with more personality, and none with more potential. She thinks — no, she knows — he has a future in acting, and she's going to do whatever it takes to help him fulfill her dream — um, his dream. The only difference is, in this case, her precocious little thespian is none other than Bandit, her 1-year-old pug who she enrolled in acting classes — yes, canine acting classes — before his first birthday. “Yep, I'm a stage mom to my dog,” Johns admits with a laugh.



Fortunately for Johns, and anyone else whose pooch has a penchant for performing, North Carolina is home to one of the Southeast's, if not the nation's, most respected providers of canine acting classes, the Bon-Clyde Learning Center in Sanford. For nearly two decades, owner Bonnie Buchanan has taught dogs like Bandit to get in touch with their inner Lassie and master the finer points of acting, whether that means fetching an item on cue, pretending to have a hurt paw, or even expressing emotions like joy, sadness, and shame.

By Jimmy Tomlin

"I have a whole repertoire of stuff I do with the dogs," Buchanan says. "It's not tricks training, but acting. For example, if I ask Gracie (Buchanan's 12-year-old border collie, a veteran canine actress who's performed in several movies and about 50 commercials) to pretend like she's sick, she can put her head down and pretend like she's sick. If I ask her to pass out, she'll pass out — she'll faint and fall over."

Buchanan then demonstrates by asking Gracie to pretend she's injured her paw. The dog gingerly sticks a front paw in the air and barks. When Buchanan asks for an expression of shame, Gracie covers her face with her front paws. For sadness, she puts her head down and mopes. And she does it all on the command of Buchanan, her skillful director.



'Build it, they will come'

While Bon-Clyde is known for its acting classes, the facility is even more widely known for its 10,000-square-foot agility center, where show dogs of all makes and models from all over the country come to hone their skills. Buchanan also hosts several competitions a year, and *Clean Run* magazine, a publication devoted to dog agility training, praised Bon-Clyde as one of the top facilities in the country.

Buchanan, a Sanford native, never intended to run an acting studio for dogs. In fact, she taught public school and went into real estate for a while before she opened Bon-Clyde. "But I've always wanted to do dog training; it's been a dream of mine for a long time," Buchanan says. "And actually, I've done dog training all my life. The first dog I trained was a German shepherd,



Above: Bon-Clyde provides dogs and their owners a state-of-the-art facility for agility training. **Below:** Since 1990, Bonnie Buchanan's reputation for creating winners has drawn clients from around the world.

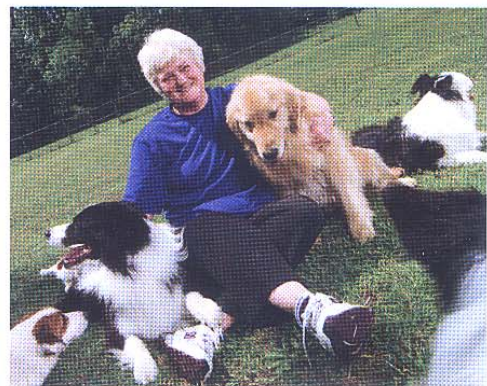
and I started training him in grammar school. We played war games, and he'd crawl in the bushes and hide and then come back out."

Buchanan opened Bon-Clyde (whose name is a hybrid of Bonnie, the owner, and Clyde, her beloved rottweiler that died of cancer) in 1990, largely upon the encouragement of her father. "My father always said, 'If you build it, they will come,'" she recalls. "And now, I mean, we've got people coming in from Canada, Japan, from all over. I never dreamed it would get this big and especially in such a small town."

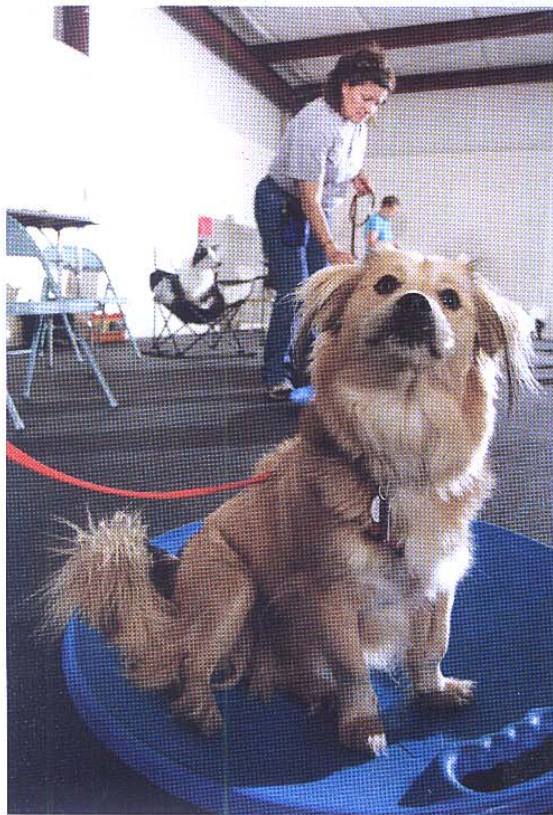
Indeed, one wouldn't figure Sanford — better known for the pedigree of its pottery than its poodles — to be a mecca for North Carolinians, much less Americans and even international citizens, involved in the highly competitive dog-show world.

And yet, Buchanan has witnessed it firsthand. She tells the story of two women from Florida who actually moved to Sanford so they could bring their dogs to Bon-Clyde.

Nearly 20 years ago, she persuaded the nearby Palomino Motel to allow dogs in the guests' rooms because it would attract large numbers of dog-show enthusiasts to Sanford. She tells of getting untold phone calls from moviemakers and public relations firms looking for



PHOTOGRAPHY BY BRYAN REGAN



Bon-Clyde Learning Center provides 22,000 square feet of climate-controlled space for improving pets' performance or behavior.

offers specialty classes for tracking and flyball, a team dog sport that involves running a course of hurdles and catching a launched tennis ball. Buchanan is also a therapy dog evaluator, meaning she

assesses their ability to visit hospitals, nursing homes, and other facilities as a therapy dog.

Great investment

Bon-Clyde is a 22,000-square-foot, climate-controlled facility. The upstairs training area houses three fully matted rings in separate rooms, each ring gated and stocked with obedience training equipment. But the real showpiece at Bon-Clyde is the agility facility, which features a competition-sized ring, equipment suitable for sanctioned competitions and workshops, and a polymer-coated sand flooring that offers sure footing for handlers and their dogs.

Buchanan's investment and efforts have paid off. She can claim a long list of Bon-Clyde graduates that have excelled in competition, as well as numerous dogs and even one cat that have modeled and starred in movies, TV shows, and commercials. Movies like *The Price of Heaven* and *El Cine*

feature Bon-Clyde graduates, and Buchanan's students have performed in commercials with Nascar stars like Dale Earnhardt, Jimmie Johnson, and Rusty Wallace. Bon-Clyde dogs have been a

hit locally, too. Buchanan recently trained a dog to star in a local theater production of *Annie* as Sandy.

She also enjoys taking some of her acting dogs to area schools, where they perform skits designed to teach children important lessons. In one skit, for example, a dog rips the tablecloth off a table, scattering dishes all over the floor. When Buchanan tries to determine which dog is guilty, none of them 'fesses up, until finally the guilty party meekly raises a paw to admit what he did. He then cleans up the mess he made, and Buchanan wraps up the skit with a lesson about the importance of taking personal responsibility.

In another skit, Gracie — Buchanan's border collie — finds a pocketbook and brings it to her owner, which of course teaches the kids a lesson about honesty.

"The dogs teach the kids responsibility, manners, honesty, relationships, and the kids just love it," Buchanan says. "They go crazy."

Buchanan, if you haven't guessed, is pretty crazy about dogs, too. "I'm doing what I love to do," she says with a big grin. "This is a dream come true for me." 🐾

Award-winning newspaper columnist and freelance writer Jimmy Tomlin lives in Greensboro.

to know more

For a link to Bon-Clyde's website, go to www.ourstate.com, and click on "This Month's Issue."

cute dogs with acting experience.

Why do you think Sherrie Johns, the stage mom from Kernersville, drives three hours round-trip to take Bandit to Bon-Clyde when there are other trainers much closer than that? In fact, Johns herself is a member of the Winston-Salem Dog Training Club. But she believes Buchanan is the best.

"I think Bonnie can teach a dog anything," Johns says. "She would take a toy or a treat and have Bandit do what she wanted within just a few seconds. ... She's just a wonderful trainer. I feel like I found a treasure when I got turned on to Bonnie's facility."

Your dog, however, doesn't have to be panting for Hollywood in order to enroll at Bon-Clyde. While the facility offers plenty of acting classes — including a three-day canine acting camp offered in June — Buchanan and her staff teach other classes like basic obedience, called "Puppy Kindergarten," and advanced agility skills for competition. The facility

From

