

THE RIDGEBA



CKS *of* KIMANI

BY BARBARA FAWVER

The red-wheaten ridged-back dog posing restfully on a scenic New Jersey hillside sizzles with intensity. Embodied in the spirit of the 15-month-old 85-pound male, and captured in his fiery eyes, is high-powered energy. “Irish” (CH Kimani’s Borne O’ The Best) will soon spring to action.

Kimani Rhodesian Ridgeback breeder Alicia Hanna, grinning, says, “When his eyes are smiling, it will steal your heart away.”

Fifty-two years since discovering the African sighthound breed, Alicia is as impassioned today as she was then about her beloved “dog for all seasons.” As the breeder of dogs that have produced more than 700 show champions, Alicia has discriminately developed the Kimani line, contemporizing the Ridgeback without forgetting the form and function of the original big-game coursing hunting dog.





Snuggling 5-week-old Ridgeback puppies, Alicia typically breeds two litters a year. Her Kimani Ridgeback line has retired every National Specialty conformation challenge trophy, including the Kimani Best of Breed trophy, two times.

Out of the first litter Alicia Hanna bred came the Best of Breed winner of the 1968 Rhodesian Ridgeback Club of the United States (RRCUS) National Specialty, BISS CH Weecha's Kimani. "It was scary," she says. "I had to live up to this level even to myself."

Her early success was followed by the agony of a 10-year hiatus before a Kimani dog would again win the National. "Breeding and showing is not all about winning trophies and ribbons," says Alicia. "There is a lot of sacrifice and heartfelt tragedy in breeding."

"I believe my dogs should be perfect, but the genetics don't allow it. Still I keep trying. I know every flaw in my own dogs and what needs repaired and how to fix it." — Alicia Hanna

After that amazing first litter — which gave her structurally sound, handsome dogs with sweet temperaments and free of the painful genetic disease hip dysplasia — Alicia had to step back and grasp what she had achieved. "I struggled to understand how important shoulder angulation is to correct structure and gait," she says. "Ridgebacks should have an upstanding presence that radiates from the front assembly."

The Kimani imprint on the Rhodesian Ridgeback breed is undeniable. Stamped in history are 12 RRCUS National Specialty Best of Breed winners, some of legendary fame. "Chip" (Multi-BIS/Multi-BISS CH Kimani's Blue Chip Image, JC, ROM) was a three-time National winner, having won in 1994, 1995 and 2000 under renown judges Anne Rogers Clark, Patricia Trotter and Barbara Rupert, respectively. In all-breed rings, Chip was one of an elite group of Ridgebacks to win multiple Bests in Show.

Littermate record setters "Durbin" (BISS CH Kimani's Lasting Impression, JC, ROM) and "Mafu" (BISS CH Kimani's Aires Above the Ground, JC, ROM) flip-flopped in 2006 and 2007, respectively, to take Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex to each other. Mafu, the sire of Chip, "was a gift for all," Alicia says. "The breed is better for his example."

Irish, whelped on St. Patrick's Day in 2014, was sired by Mafu out of "Binga" (GCH Kimani's Time Honored). A linebreeding, Binga was bred to her maternal grandsire Mafu. "I've used linebreeding since the beginning," says Alicia. "Outcrossing can help stabilize genetic problems because it suppresses recessive genes, but it also can be disastrous. If I outcross, I will then linebreed from the outcross."

Humbled to have been recognized by the American Kennel Club as the 2012 Hound Group Breeder of the Year, Alicia built the Kimani dynasty by breeding two bloodlines. "I have a couple of threads going," she says. "It is very difficult to breed for conformation while focusing on health issues. I've been lucky that I was able to keep the good conformation and improve upon and eliminate in my line early health concerns such as hip dysplasia."

Observing Alicia as she watches her dogs stack, trot and run at full speed is like wallowing in ruthless perfectionism. "Americans are drawn to perfection," she explains. "I believe my dogs should be perfect, but the genetics don't allow it. Still I keep trying. I know every flaw in my own dogs and what needs repaired and how to fix it."

Conceding that she primarily breeds dogs for herself for showing, Alicia also adores her puppy buyers. "They love their dogs and keep coming back generation after generation," she says. "Ridgebacks are companion dogs first."

LEARNING FORM & FUNCTION

A self-described neophyte when she bought her first Rhodesian Ridgeback in 1963, Alicia, a newlywed at the time, eagerly believed the breeders when they told her the lovely female puppy's short ridge down the back would eventually grow. The breed's satiny coat and athletic, muscular build stoked a fondness she already had for those qualities in horses.

Her love of horses was apparent when she chose a five-gaited American Saddlebred over a car when she was 17. "I knew I could drive my father's car almost any time," she says.

Alicia took her first Ridgeback, Mohr's Makanga Weecha, to obedience class and earned a CD (Companion Dog) title. She bred "Weecha" to her paternal uncle, which resulted in the first litter that gave her "Kimani," the 1968 RRCUS National Specialty winner from the classes. The puppies were whelped in her second-floor apartment in Livingston, New Jersey. Dog breeding came naturally to Alicia, as her parents had bred Cocker Spaniels and instilled in her "how wonderful it was," she says.



Puppies eagerly eat Purina Pro Plan SPORT Performance 30/20 Chicken & Rice Formula, an all life stages food fed to every Kimani Ridgeback.



Alicia gaits "Irish," a 15-month-old male who depicts the correct long, free stride of the breed. "A study of gait will tell you precisely how desirable a Ridgeback is in terms of his conformation," she says.



Nine-year-old “Beryl” (CH Kimani’s Time After Time, ROM), left, and 3-month-old “Armani” depict correct Ridgeback heads. Both have big, round, dark eyes, with no cheek outside the eyes, and their ears are high on a flat skull and lay close to their face. Their intelligent expressions are a classic characteristic.



Alicia trims “Changa” (CH Kimani’s Visual Effects). The 18-month-old is losing her puppy coat as it changes to a beautiful red-wheaten adult coat.

Motivated to one day show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, a childhood dream, Alicia took Kimani to the New York Ridgeback Specialty held at the same time and thus began her love for the show ring. Alicia attained her dream of winning Best of Breed at Westminster with her beloved Mafu in 2005 and again in 2007.

When Alicia bred her second litter, out of Kimani, her foundation bitch, the family had moved to the countryside in Chester, New Jersey, where she still lives today. A small hobby kennel accommodated her growing interest in dog breeding. With few prominent males in the East, Alicia arranged an outcross breeding to a male bred by Blanche Brophy of Pinebush, New York, Hopehill’s Matchless, out of the Gazeley line of Major T.C. Hawley of Johannesburg, South Africa.

The litter gave her “Urimba” (CH Kimani’s Urimba of Mohridge, ROM), her foundation sire. “Everything goes back to him,” she says. Among more than 10 champions Urimba sired to earn Register of Merit

status were two RRCUS National Specialty Best of Breed winners: CH Kimani’s Star of Africa in 1977 and CH Calico Ridge Sweet Music Man in 1982.

Endeavoring to get back on top after Kimani, Alicia began studying the sporty sighthound breed. “The closer the dog’s shoulder blades are to a 45-degree angle, the better,” she says. “Angulation of the shoulder blade affects reach and balance, all which affects gait. A Ridgeback’s gait should be effortless and flowing, covering the maximum amount of ground with the least amount of effort. No trait is harder to breed for or easier to lose than a good front. It can take generations, if at all, to recover.”

In his native South Africa, the Rhodesian Ridgeback was a courageous, powerful hunter developed by early Dutch settlers to track and course wild game. Great endurance and the ability to run at exceptionally high speeds were essential for the job.

“The hindquarters of the Ridgeback are like that of other fast runners,” says Alicia. “The length of the femur must be shorter than the tibia-fibula to have total efficiency of the limbs. The extended tibia-fibula lengthens the Achilles tendon, one of



the longest tendons of the body, producing strength and power to the thigh muscle seven times a dog's body weight. This allows for maximum retraction and extension of the leg."

A primary source for her information on the breed was a book titled "The Rhodesian Ridgeback: The Origin, History and Standard," published in 1957 and written by Major Hawley, who was considered the foremost authority on the breed. Alicia counts as one of her crowning achievements winning Best of Breed under Hawley at the 1982 RRCUS National Specialty with BISS CH Kimani's Currituck.

It was a good time for learning. Veterinary schools frequently offered seminars for dog breeders on structure and movement and the effects of genetic diseases. "They would teach us what makes a correct Ridgeback," Alicia says. "This tutoring was so important."

Alicia became a lifelong believer in health testing. Ridgebacks are tested for hip and elbow dysplasia, thyroid disease, eye diseases, and deafness. In 2006, the Orthopedic Foundation for Animals named her bitch, CH Kimani's Motion Picture II, as the 1 millionth dog screened for hip dysplasia since the test was first offered in 1966.

An active member of the parent club, Alicia was president and also served as chair of the standards committee. During her tenure the club began rotating the location of the National Specialty after being held for several years in New York during Westminster. She was instrumental in introducing a Sweepstakes competition to encourage novice enthusiasts.

Her most impactful contribution to Ridgeback lovers is sharing her knowledge. As an educator, Alicia has presented her breed seminar throughout the world and in the U.S. She is preparing to publish a book of the same title, "The Standard's Image: An Inside Look at the Form and Function of the Rhodesian Ridgeback."

A LIFETIME OF LOVE

Back to Irish lying on the hillside, this impressive, statuesque Ridgeback is eagerly awaiting the chance to chase anything that moves. Alicia describes him as a "high-powered stallion beautifully put together, upstanding, strong and agile."

"All my dogs' qualities are coming to fruition in great number," she says.

She fully credits the Kimani bitches for their contributions. "The bitch is everything!" she exclaims.

"You can breed a slightly less bitch out of a great family and be better off than if you breed a better bitch from a family of less quality."

Kimani has been blessed to have countless Register of Merit dogs and bitches. Reflecting on the sires, Alicia says, "A lot of people said Mafu was my greatest dog, and he was pretty close to perfect, but he descended from a lot of great dogs."

The two-time Best of Breed winner at Westminster, Mafu was the first American-bred Ridgeback to win a Challenge Certificate for Best Dog at Crufts and was a frequent RRCUS Top Stud Dog. Mafu is remembered by Alicia for other things. "He was very noble and aristocratic, unflinchingly loyal, an ever faithful companion," she says.

Mafu passed away in April, two months before turning 12. He left a void painfully felt by Alicia and his fellow house dog and littermate sister, Durbin. They both grieve for him. Durbin, with her graying muzzle and gentle, loving eyes, isn't as interested in chasing toys, and Alicia is taking time before bringing another dog into the house. The empty dog beds are reminders that Mafu is gone.

"I am very loyal to my old dogs," Alicia says.

The passing of a beloved Ridgeback is certainly among the heart-felt tragedies of dog breeding. One gets the feeling that a lifetime has not been long enough for Alicia to enjoy her beautiful Kimani Ridgebacks. "My love for this breed equals my love for each individual dog," she says. "This dedication has given me the required objectivity that has enabled me to achieve many accomplishments of which I am most proud."

In short, "I am a well-seasoned breeder who really loves her dogs." ■



CH Kimani's Borne O' The Best

'THE LION DOG': A MISLEADING MONIKER

The African Lion Dog, as the Rhodesian Ridgeback is often known, takes his name for keeping big game, not necessarily lions, at bay during hunts. The Ridgeback was a superb hunting dog that could turn in a split second, swerve and fake an attack as well as pursue fleeting game. The courageous, powerful breed was developed more than 350 years ago by Dutch settlers in South Africa, where today the Ridgeback is the national dog.

A sighthound with tremendous speed to course game, the Ridgeback's most distinguishing characteristic is a long ridge on his back inherited from the indigenous African dogs that were crossed with domestic breeds to build resistance to diseases and parasites of the region. The ridge, due to hair growing in the opposite direction of the rest of the coat, starts at the shoulder and ends at the hips. It should have two symmetrical crowns, or whorls, and should be clearly defined and tapering.