



# “We Shine Together”

New to the dog fancy, young Octavia Stensen said she’d do anything to get her puppy. Today, she’s one of America’s top-winning juniors. **AS TOLD TO LINDSEY DOBRUCK**

COURTESY/AUTUMN STENSEN

**A**s the AKC’s 178th most popular breed—out of 199—the Norwegian Buhund is far from the top.

Unless that Buhund is handled by 19-year-old Octavia Stensen.

Octavia and her Buhund, Pineapple (Bronze G.Ch. Cultiva Cruisin For

A Bruisin Pineapple Express, CGC, TKN), achieved one of the highest honors in Junior Showmanship last December, winning Best Junior at the 2023 AKC National Championship, presented by Royal Canin.

As a first-generation fancier, Octavia is a rare breed herself. She didn’t grow

up in the show world, though she’d occasionally attend dog shows with her grandmother, who enjoyed the events as a spectator. At one show, her grandmother noticed a Buhund; its pricked ears and curled tail reminded her of Octavia’s pet Shiba Inu, who had recently passed. She got a breeder’s





Young Octavia earned her first Best Junior with Fiona, under Judge Honey Glendinning.

contact information, and the rest—well, we'll let Octavia tell you herself.

**Family Dog** spoke with Octavia as she was traveling from Washington to California, where she was headed to the Kennel Club of Palm Springs show in January.

Questions and responses have been edited for length and clarity.

**Family Dog:** You had never heard of Norwegian Buhunds before your grandmother saw one and connected you to a breeder. What happened next?

**Octavia Stensen:** We went over to her house, not in the mindset that we would take home a dog—maybe foster or something. We got to meet a few dogs and, I swear, the second I walked in the door, I had my eyes set on what's now my older bitch, Fiona. She was 9 months old at the time, I believe, so she wasn't a cute little puppy anymore. ... I thought, "That dog is gonna be mine."

I sat with her and I hugged her and I stayed with her the entire time. My mom's talking to the breeder, they're chatting it up. She's totally interested in different dogs. And in my mind I kept thinking, "No, Mom, you don't get it. This dog is coming home with us." And, with a little persuasion, she was in our car later that evening.

**FD:** Love at first sight! You clearly had an eye for a dog, even at 10 years

old. What inspired you to show her?

**Octavia:** I went to the Seattle dog show before I ever walked in the ring. They did a bunch of Meet the Breeds [events], and I thought that aspect was fun—not the "watching the dogs run

around" part. But I fell in love with Fiona. The breeder said, "Well, I'd really love for her to be shown—it's a deal breaker if you don't want to show her." ... And I told my mom, "I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do it. I'll do anything for this dog."

**FD:** And how did it go?

**Octavia:** The first time I walked in the ring at the Seattle Kennel Club's Juniors seminar, I stepped out crying.

**FD:** Oh no!

**Octavia:** But a handler came up to my mom afterwards—it was John Wilcox, actually. He saw that I was crying, and said, "Hey, my wife teaches handling classes. Do you want my wife to help your daughter? We can do a private little lesson, right off to the side, right now." ... Tammie Wilcox was so helpful.



Octavia and Pineapple have taken top placements in the most prestigious competitions—here, the duo smiles with their second-place ribbon from the 2023 Westminster Kennel Club Junior Showmanship Finals.

COURTESY ELAINE RUSHION BOTTOM: COURTESY AUTUMN STENSEN



She gave me a few pointers here and there. I mean, seriously, I couldn't have known less about what I was doing. I ended up working for Tammie as her assistant years down the line.

**FD:** Had you taken any handling classes before that?

**Octavia:** Earlier that day I found out what hand to hold the leash in. I knew nothing. I went into the seminar, and the girl said, "OK, stack up your dog." And I was like, "What's a stack?"

**FD:** You started in the breed ring before competing in Junior Showmanship. How did it feel being the youngest handler showing against the adult Buhund breeders?



*As a child, Octavia was shy and introverted, she says. She credits dog shows for helping her grow into the confident, poised handler she is today: "It's completely changed my life."*

**Octavia:** I always felt in the breed ring, I'm not the one being watched. So in some senses, I felt a lot of relief. But I had a really good support group in the breed that was willing to help me, and so I never felt scared in the breed ring.

I always felt like I was being supported, and never felt like I was going head-to-head or anything like that.

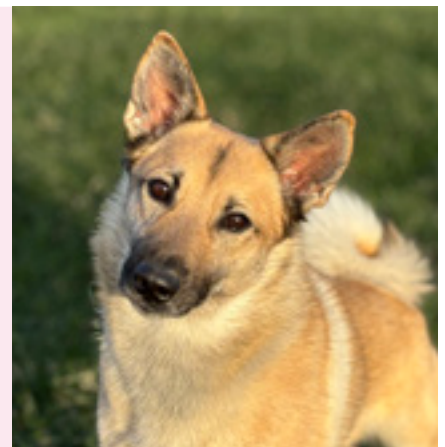
**FD:** Conversely, in the Juniors ring, you compete against your peers—but

## A Bit on Buhunds

- The Norwegian Buhund is also known as the Norsk Buhund and the Norwegian Sheepdog. The name *Buhund* is derived from *bu*, the Norwegian word for farm or homestead.
- A relative newcomer to AKC, the Norwegian Buhund was accepted into the Herding Group in 2009. But according to the Norwegian Buhund Club of America, they've been around since approximately 900 A.D. An excavation of the Viking Gokstad ship in Norway revealed a grave with six Spitz-type skeletons, resembling

distant relatives of the Buhund.

- The breed comes in two coat colors—black and wheaten, which can vary from a light cream to red.
- As a Spitz breed, the Buhund exhibits many traits designed for protection from harsh, Nordic winters: small, wedged ears; a tail curled over his back; a thick, double coat; and a square body.
- The Buhund is an affectionate, versatile breed, with talents in herding, companion events, and therapy work. "They are so sweet and so outgoing. I am obsessed with them," Octavia



says. "I love them so much. ... They'll come right up and sit in your lap, do whatever you want. They are love bugs to the end."





*"It's definitely a moment that I feel like all juniors dream about." Octavia takes Best Junior at the 2023 AKC National Championship.*

with a breed not typically seen in Juniors. How did the judges respond?

**Octavia:** Buhunds have become so, so much more recognized, even just in the past two years. So when I started out, there were a lot of very light-colored Buhunds, and my bitch was very, very red—she was dark wheaten, and she had a mask. ... So she automatically didn't look a lot like other Buhunds that were in our area, even if you knew what a Buhund was. If you didn't know what a Buhund was, then you were *really* lost.

So in the Juniors ring, there were a lot of times where I felt like judges would look at me and think, "I don't even know what you're supposed to be showing or how it's meant to be shown." It was challenging and frustrating in a lot

of ways, but I'm really glad that I stuck with it because it ended up being so rewarding.

**FD:** You showed Fiona to her Bronze Grand Championship before she retired—now you're showing her daughter, Pineapple. What's it like showing your first Bred-by-Exhibitor bitch?

**Octavia:** I feel like there was definitely an advantage from having her from birth. When I got Fiona she was already 9 months old, she already had her own ideas of how the world worked. And I didn't know how to train a dog—there were a lot of challenges within training her as I'm training myself. There were a lot of things that we were both confused about—we

were basically learning at the same time.

Having Pineapple and basically training her exactly how I wanted my show dog to be trained was an ideal world for me. And I was so lucky to have that.

**FD:** How would you describe your bond with Pineapple?

**Octavia:** You know, she's in my mind a lot. I like to think that she is me in a dog. She's definitely my heart dog and we're just always on the same page. It's so cool to have that heart dog that knows you so well.

**FD:** And together, you've taken one of the biggest victories in Junior Showmanship.

**Octavia:** It's definitely a moment that I feel like all juniors dream about. I'm still extremely grateful for the experience. ... I think we shine together, and we've had a great career together. ... I went to Westminster with Pineapple—it'll be three times in 2024—and qualified for Orlando, three times as well with her. That was amazing. It's been fantastic.

**FD:** Some of the best junior handlers in the country compete at the AKC National Championship—how did you feel going up against such talented competitors?

**Octavia:** I think it's always good to have a positive mindset ... not even in a cocky sense, just in a sense that I'm a possibility. ... I'm there, I'm going to put my best foot out there. And that's all I can do. And if the judge sees that, and I put my all into that performance, that's all I can hope for.

**FD:** You said you and Pineapple are always on the same page. So what was going through her head when you took Best Junior?

**Octavia:** There's a really fantastic picture that was taken of us—my hand's over my mouth, just in shock of being pointed at, and she's looking around like, "Is he pointing at us?" I think that she was just as much in awe as I was! **FD**

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