



Agility is her game, but posing brought her fame. Cheers distracted agility dog Winky during her memorable run at the 2019 Westminster Masters Agility Championship. Playing to the crowd earned her fans around the world.

Curly, clever, and so, so cute, the Bichon Frise was born to chase smiles.

By Mara Bovsun

Forget about those blazing Border Collies, speedy Shetland Sheepdogs, and flying Papillons. The 2019 Westminster Masters Agility Championship belonged to a powder puff.

It didn't matter that Winky, a 5-year-old Bichon Frise, completed the course in a leisurely 192 seconds, with 92 faults, noted the *Rockland/Westchester Journal News*. (The winning time was about 32 seconds.)

By the next morning, the tiny lapdog from New City, New York, was famous.

LOOK AT ME!



Prince is always trying to make new friends.

Video of her agility “stroll” went viral. Tweepers called her a “spirit animal” and “the people’s champ.” In an essay, “A Lesson from Winky,” Marie Osmond urged fans to “remember Winky...the adorable little soul who reminded us all to simply enjoy life and be happy with our efforts...no matter how imperfect they may be.”

Winky’s owner, Joanne Ouchterloney, told FD that the 13-pound dog is a seasoned competitor, precise and quick, who is close to achieving her Master Agility Champion (MACH) title.

In other words, she knows her way around an agility course.

So what happened?

For one thing, Ouchterloney says, Westmin-

ster is a very intense experience, with constant noise, scents, and sights.

Their day had started before dawn and their second run, the one that went viral, was not until 4 P.M.

But the real problem?

People.

Westminster’s huge crowds touched something deep in Winky’s soul—the Bichon Frisé’s primal instinct to show off.

Ouchterloney, who has run Bichons in agility for 15 years, realized right away things might not go as she hoped.

“I went out there knowing this was going to be one of her ‘look at me’ runs,” she says.

At the top of the A-frame, Winky paused.

“She was like, ‘Oooooo, I’m on the A-frame

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and look at all these people,’ ” says Ouchterloney. “‘This is fun!’ ”

Then she got to the dog walk. “She was posing up there. ‘See me. You see me from this angle. You see me from that angle,’ ” her partner recalls.

While it was happening, Ouchterloney was mortified, hoping the ground would swallow them. “Then it was over, and I couldn’t believe the cheers we got as we were walking through the crowds to go back to the crating area,” she says. “It was insane.”

What Comes Naturally

It was all so cute, so funny, so, in a word,

Bichon, says Gail Antetomaso, of Long Island, New York, president of the Bichon Frise Club of America.

“Here’s my take on Bichons,” she says. “It’s like living with a perpetual 3-year-old. They are very inquisitive. They are very smart. They want to know what’s going on, but they march to their own drummer.”

The drumbeat generally takes them, as it did Winky, on a shortcut to center stage.

“Winky had the crowd,” says breeder Lorie Carlton. “That is a typical Bichon. ‘I’m the star of the show, and I’m just going to show off for you.’ Very typical Bichon attitude.”

Carlton should know. She has had a 45-year

career breeding and showing Bichons. Her most recent triumph is GCh. Belle Creek’s All I Care About Is Love, aka Flynn, who captured Best in Show at 2018’s Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

Flynn is well-known for his spotlight-snatching stunts, tail wags and paw waves delivered like a punchline. His Westminster BIS predecessor, Ch. Special Times Just Right, also had that talent, as demonstrated by the wild double pump of his fluffy paws when he won the show in 2001.

Flynn retired right after Westminster, but he loves the scene so much that Carlton takes him along when she shows other dogs. Even

from the sidelines, Flynn still finds ways to please the crowd.

“He sits on top of the crate,” says Carlton. “Anyone wants to love on him—no problem. You want to pick him up—no problem. Want him to meet kids? Sure, no problem. ... The tail never goes down.”

Life Is a Circus

Not much is known about the Bichon’s ancient ancestors, but they are one of several small breeds that have roots stretching back to antiquity.

Somewhere along the line, there appeared several varieties of a “small, coated dog, often

THIS PAGE LAURA WINSTON

BITS About the BICHON

Origin: Tenerife, the largest of the Canary Islands.

Purpose: Making people smile.

AKC Recognition: 1973, Non-Sporting Group

There's a word for that: French nobles so pampered their Bichons that a new verb, based on the breed's name, entered the language—*bichonner*. In English it means to pet, groom, and, of course, pamper.

Training tips: Consistency is essential—especially with housetraining—because Bichons, while smart and playful, have minds of their own. They are energetic, sturdy, and love to show off.

Hypoallergenic? Bichons are among the breeds with a non-shedding coat, so they may work for those who have allergies or hate vacuuming. (Keep in mind, no dog is 100 percent hypoallergenic for all people.)

Best For: People who love to be with their dogs and to play with hair. Bichons make excellent apartment dogs, but are highly adaptable and will thrive anywhere as long as they have people to love them.



Flynn in his glory.

white,” as author Barbara Stubbs noted in her 1990 book, *The Complete Bichon Frise*. They are thought to have descended from

the Barbet, a curly-coated water dog.

Some of today's most beloved breeds came from these little creatures. There are the



“Bichon Frise Lying on a Red Pillow,” by L. Eugene Lambert, 1854

straight-haired types, like the Maltese, and the ones that the French called *bichon à poil frise*, which translates into English as “curly-haired lapdog.”

They flourished along the maritime trade routes, from Cuba to the Canary Islands. A dog known as the Tenerife Bichon or Tenerife terrier is considered the ancestor of the modern Bichon Frise.

Bichons made their way into the hearts and laps of European royalty in the 1300s.

France's 16th-century king Henry III's infatuation with his pets sparked a fad of carrying little dogs in baskets dangled by ribbons from the owner's neck.

The French Revolution ended all that. Pampered pups of the rich and royal were kicked out of their castles and to the streets, where survival depended on their ability to make people love them.

Through the 19th century, canine street urchins danced and performed tricks, skills

LEFT: PATRINA ODETTE; RIGHT: AKC MUSEUM OF THE DOG

Puff and Circumstance

What's with the ball-shaped head? Bichon Frise Club of America president Gail Antetomaso says it's explained in the breed standard, which specifies that the ideal is a "small, sturdy powder puff of a dog."

Antetomaso, who has been involved with Bichons since the mid-1980s, says there should be no hard angles. "The whole idea is it's supposed to be round—round legs, round body, round head."

Easier said than done, she admits. Even with ongoing conditioning, it can take a couple of hours to prepare a Bichon for the show ring. "It's always a work in progress," she says.

Joanne Ouchterloney, who competes in agility with her Bichons, chose the breed over several others after she saw them at a dog show. "They

were lined up on the grooming table because they obviously have to get super fluffed. They all looked so smart to me. And I said, this is the dog I want," she recalls.

But with work, school, a family, and training for sports, super fluff is hard to achieve on a daily basis. She keeps her athletes in a shorter clip, but still maintains the round appearance that makes a Bichon a Bichon. Her three dogs—Winky, Razzle, 2, and Macaroni, 10—have regular visits to the groomer. Like her, many Bichon owners leave the clipping to the pros.

Still, as daunting as it may seem, some prefer a DIY approach. Oneida Cintron says her goal with her puppy, Prince, is to have fun. Grooming is part of that.

"It's not a burden. They love to be combed," she says. "It's like bonding. They relax. They fall asleep. They learn to trust. We have a routine."

Her advice to new owners is to teach puppies to enjoy grooming—hair, teeth, and nails. Good breeders will start this education soon after the puppies are born and before they go to their owners.

Apparently, Cintron is not the only one who loves grooming pet Bichons. She belongs to a Facebook group, Amateur Bichon Grooming, that has 3,673 members devoted to mastering the fine art of the puff. They trade tips about products and techniques, offer advice, and, best of all, they get to show off their handiwork to people who appreciate a well-rounded dog.

Casper died early in 2019 and Prince came into their lives soon after. The Cintrons immediately started a total immersion puppy program—socialization, swimming lessons, training, pack walks, and trips to Canine Camp Getaway of NY.

Before his first birthday, Prince had already tried agility, lure coursing, and flyball, and has had a great time playing with the other dogs and people. He showed a surprising flair for barn hunt.

For the Cintrons, who love to visit new places, the breed is perfect. At 9½ to 11½ inches at the shoulder, they are small enough to be easy travel companions but sturdy, lively, and happy to do whatever their people want.

"Bichons, if you want to go hiking, go here, walk there, they are with you," she says. "But if you want to sit down and relax, they'll sit down and relax with you."

She especially admires her puppy's talent for making friends, canine, and human.

When Prince sees a friendly person, his typical move is to run over, stand on his hind legs, and pump his paws in the air to make sure he's being noticed. Says Oneida, "It's like he's going up to the person and saying, 'Hello! Hello! Look! It's me!'" **FD**

For more information, visit bichon.org.



Ideally, a Bichon should look like a powder puff with dark dancing eyes.

that helped organ grinders, circus performers, and traveling peddlers earn their keep.

To learn tricks, they needed brains and sturdy bodies. To appeal to spectators, they needed adorable faces and pleasing mannerism. Bichons, with their bright, dark, black-rimmed eyes, powder-puff coat (see sidebar) and jaunty tail held over the back, were made for this work.

These qualities have won the breed legions of devoted fans in the modern world.

Go Everywhere, Do Everything

Take Oneida and Albert Cintron, who live in New York City. For them, life is all about

the Bichon.

"Vacations and weekends, we plan everything around our dog," says Oneida. "We work, and we play with the dog."

The Cintrons own one of Flynn's sons, 10-month-old Prince, the couple's second purebred Bichon. They fell in love with the breed several years ago when they adopted a Bichon mix from a shelter. When he passed away, she says, they purchased a puppy, Casper, from a breeder.

The Cintrons trained Casper to be comfortable anywhere and with anyone. They love the beach, so their dog learned to swim and ride a boogie board.