

# Riva

**THE  
FIRST  
QUINTUPLE  
CHAMPION**  
in Border Collie  
history!

By Gerianne Darnell

I am excited to share with all of my Border Collie friends the story of my Quintuple Champion Border Collie “Riva,” who now holds AKC Championship titles in conformation, herding, obedience, agility, and tracking.



Riva earning her VST.  
Photo courtesy of Indian Nations Tracking Club

## Outburst Chasing Butterflies

In 1999, I asked Riva’s breeder, Vicki Jones of Outburst Border Collies, if the female Border Collie puppy I was considering would be capable of four or five AKC Championships, and she said, “Oh SURE she would!” I’m not sure Vicki knew exactly what it all entailed, but here we are more than 12 years later with the first Quintuple Champion Border Collie,  
**CH CT OTCH MACH HC VCCH UCD UAg1  
Outburst Chasing Butterflies  
UDX RAE TDX VST HXAsd HIBd HSBs MX NAP  
MXJ OJP, STDsd, PDI, EAC EJC OGC TN-E  
WV-O TG-N, ASCA RS-N, CL3-SFH**

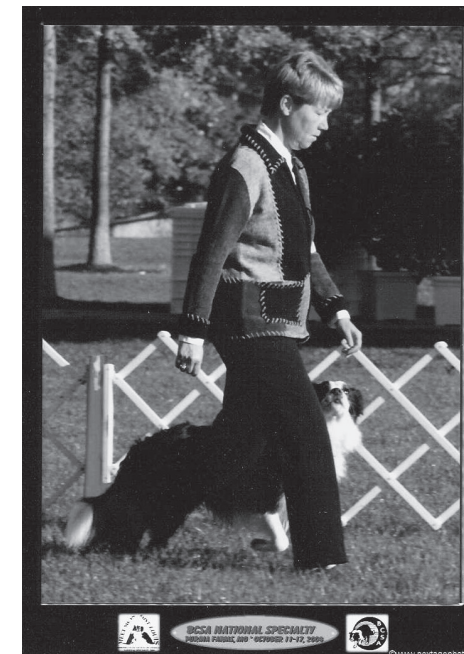


The first title Riva earned was the TD, and the last title was the VST to complete her CT, VCCH, and Quintuple Championship. The 12 years in between was a journey full of excitement, occasional disappointments, hard work, and the satisfaction of working with my very best girl friend, Riva.

Riva’s first Championship was her Conformation Championship, which she finished easily in 2000 at the age of 13 months. Riva’s second Championship was her MACH. It wasn’t an easy Championship, but it wasn’t a particularly difficult one, either. Riva finished her MACH in 2005 at the age of 5 and a half.

Our attention then turned to the Herding Championship. The actual earning of the HC was a piece of cake for Riva – it was the **getting** to that point that was hard! When I got Riva, I thought that Border Collies just “did” herding, you just had to point the dog toward the sheep and the dog would know what to do. HA! What started out as a casual “taking my dog to see the sheep” once a week eventually turned in to a total obsession. In 2006, Riva earned her HC in four weekends with five majors and several HITs, and she was also ranked in the Top 10 Advanced Border Collies in 2006. Finishing her HC made Riva a Triple Champion!

Riva’s obedience career started in 2003; she was a fabulous Novice Dog with 12



First Places, five High in Trials, and an average score of 198. At one memorable show, she won a runoff for High in Trial with a 199, and she also earned a Double Q in agility on the same day. Riva’s CDX came in the spring of 2004, and she also earned a Double Q the same day she finished her CDX. While finishing up her MACH and getting ready for her HC, we continued to train in obedience, and Riva finished her UD in January of 2007. At her very next weekend out, Riva picked up a First in Utility B, a First in Open B, and 37 OTCH points! Wow! Eight months later, Riva finished her OTCH at my local club’s show, and it was an exciting and memorable day. Now Riva was a Quadruple Champion, and I wondered, did I dare to dream that she could be a Quintuple Champion???



I started tracking with Riva shortly after she came home in the late fall of 1999. I had earned several TDXs at that point on Papillons and a Basset Hound, but I had never earned a VST. Riva was the first puppy that I did tracks on other surfaces besides grass. Riva earned her TD at the age of 8 months. It was a warm day in April in central Iowa, and the ticks were everywhere. The grass was short

and sparse, and there was a lot of goose poop on her track; Riva thought that was a great reward! Shortly after what I assumed was the last turn, Riva came across a glove. I knew it was too soon past the turn for the article to be there, and I picked the glove up and turned around to the judges and said, “Ummm, is this it?” and they said, “Go on.” My silly young puppy was pretty sure we were done, but I convinced her to keep going, and in another 75 yards or so we found the **real** glove! I found out later that the tracklayer had accidentally dropped one of his own gloves while laying the track, discovered his error when he finished laying the track, and then told the judges what had happened. The judges had decided to go ahead and use the track anyway, and if Riva had had a problem re-starting after the first glove, she would have been given the alternate track. Thank goodness she did re-start, as I don’t think she had another track in her that day.

I didn’t track again with Riva until the late summer of 2007, toward the end of her OTCH. Dee Dee Rose was instructing at my “Obedience Camp For The Small Dog” in August of that year, and she had been working with a tracking method developed by Steve White. Steve does a lot of work with police dogs, and it requires a reliable method that will produce quick, nose-down results on any surface. The name of the method is “Hydration Intensified Tracking Training” and in a nutshell, the tracklayer sprays a stream of water on asphalt and then walks the track again while putting down tasty treats very close together. The water “traps” the scent and makes it easier for the dog to smell the track on a hard surface, and the closely spaced treats encourage the dog to work in a nose-down manner.

I loved the results that Dee Dee and I saw in the campers’ dogs that weekend, and I started Riva the day after camp ended. Riva, being the penultimate chow hound, thought the HITT method was

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Photo by Kathy Ubben

a marvelous idea. Over the next several months, Riva and I tracked at least four or five times a week. I had a friend make me a hunter orange vest that said “Working Search Dog” on the back to hopefully answer the question in people’s minds of “What is that woman **doing** out in that parking lot?!” I’m surprised that I didn’t get more questions than I did.

Riva and I progressed from asphalt to concrete to crushed rock to bark. We did straight lines, curves and serpentine, and then turns, all on hard surface. We slowly increased the distance between the treats, and then decreased the amount of spray, occasionally still spraying water at surface transitions and turns. Eventually we strung the surfaces together, started working around buildings, and added grass back in to our training plan. Whereas before I would look longingly at green, rolling fields as a potential place to track, now I was

looking at Community Colleges, Business Parks, church parking lots, and schools as new places to train.

Looking back on it, I think I entered Riva a little too soon in her first VST test in September of 2008. That said, she did a great job, but veered left at a fork instead of right and couldn’t recover. I entered another test that fall, and it was very windy and warm, and all Riva missed was the moment of truth turn (the moment of truth turn is a turn out in the open, where the dog has to find the turn on a non-vegetated surface without being able to fringe-track on any nearby vegetation). She did the rest of the track beautifully.

Due to Riva’s age at the time (9 ½), I was doing her TDX training at the same time as her VST training, something many of the “experts” think is not a good idea. Riva’s first TDX test was also in the late fall of 2008, and again, she almost passed. In March of 2009, I entered what can only be called “The TDX test from

hell” in southern Iowa. My friend and I both got in to the test, and we stopped to look at the test site on the way to the motel the night before the test. It just looked beautiful. As we drove in to the parking lot of the motel that evening, the first raindrops fell, and then the skies opened up, and it never stopped raining all night. When we got to the test site the next day, some of Riva’s track was actually under water! In all of the training and showing I did with Riva over almost 13 years, I think I was most proud of her on that day. She started well, picking her way through the sodden vegetation, and after the second turn, she was in deep, sucking mud. She actually managed to make another turn in the mud, came to the edge of what looked like a wide stream (which was not there the day before), and proceeded to more or less **swim** across the area. It was up to her neck. Riva came up out of the water and in a little while, came across the first article. When re-started, we both just ran out of gas to the dreaded whistle, but I couldn’t have been more thrilled than if she had passed. No other dog got as far as Riva did that day.

I decided after that test, that since Riva was now going on 10 years old, we should concentrate on the TDX and get it out of the way. Although VST is ridiculously hard mentally, I don’t think it is as physically hard as the TDX, and I didn’t want to ask Riva to plow her way through the tough cover much longer. After another near miss, Riva passed her TDX on a glorious, **hot** day in November of 2009, in an area where the deer run wild. We struggled at the first turn, but after that Riva just motored on through and did the rest of the track in about 15 minutes. She was the only dog to pass either the TD or TDX that day. Now, at age 10, with the TDX title in hand, the only thing that stood between Riva and the Quintuple Championship was the VST, the one thing in dog training that had eluded me for many years.

In the spring of 2010, I was way, way down the alternate lists of the VST tests

## FIRST Quintuple Champion Border Collie



Photo by Gerianne Darnell

I entered. I was feeling quite blue that “the luck of the draw” might keep me from my dream.



And then, around Memorial Day of that year, something happened that made the VST mean nothing, as I almost lost my wonderful girl. During a routine chiropractic exam, a lump was discovered on the side of Riva’s neck. I could tell the vet thought the lymph nodes were involved, and after an agonizing 20 minutes waiting for the results of the aspiration, I found out that Riva did **not** have lymphoma. Thank You God! But, there was **some** kind of large growth on her neck. I had pulled a tick off of Riva during that time frame, so the chiro vet and I decided that a course of doxycycline was in order. Thank goodness my husband is also a vet, as he recognized that Riva was having a severe allergic

reaction to the doxy. Her liver values went off the chart, and it was a very scary couple of days. Once we got Riva’s blood work stabilized, she had a very involved surgery to remove the growth. After the surgery I found out that the growth was entwined around both her jugular and carotid arteries! Riva came home with a drain, and the surgery really took a lot out of her. We didn’t track for a couple months after that incident, and it never really was determined what caused the lump to form, and it has never come back, thank goodness.



Riva was in a couple of VST tests in the fall of 2010, one of which some wonderful friends drove her to St. Louis all the way from Iowa to meet me at the Border Collie National. Now those are true friends! I found out when we were halfway to the National that Riva had moved up on the alternate list and had made it

in to a test about an hour from St. Louis. But sadly, in both tests that fall it was warm, and it just wasn’t Riva’s day.

The winter of 2010-11 was when the thought began to surface that Riva and I were going to run out of time, as Riva was going on 12 years old. When I got the call that we had made it in to a test in Denver in late May, I was worried about the altitude, the heat, and traveling so far with an older dog, but I knew we wouldn’t pass if we didn’t go when we had the chance. The draw was very early at 5:45 a.m., and I was disappointed to draw the next-to-last track. We waited hours for our turn, and the sun was climbing in the sky. Riva started well, made the first turn, and went out in to the parking lot. After some searching, she made the moment-of-truth turn and found an article. Yeah! We re-started, had some trouble on the next turn that was

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also on hard surface, but eventually we were tracking strongly down the side of a building. Riva went out in to a scrubby field, but soon came back to the turn and continued through a courtyard. She then went down some stairs, and I was thinking we were quite a ways through the track at that point. There was a huge parking lot in front of us, and Riva went out in to the parking lot, missing the turn at the bottom of the stairs, to hear that awful whistle. When put back on the track, it was just one more turn and the final article. I was so disappointed that we had made it through all of the “hard” stuff and had come so close to our dream. But I was convinced more than ever that we could **do** this.

Again, we didn’t make any of the draws for the “local” tests in the fall of 2011. I then found out that we had made the draw into a test in Wisconsin. I was very excited, as although it was a long drive, the pass rate there was really quite good, and I had heard wonderful things about the site. The weekend before the Wisconsin test, I was entered in three local agility trials with my younger Border Collie, Rick. When I got home from the Friday trial, I got a call that I had moved way up the alternate list and

gotten in to a test in just 36 hours in Chicago. My gut said “Don’t go!” and wait for the possibly more favorable conditions and better mental preparation for the Wisconsin test the following weekend, but I thought, what if this was the test that we were supposed to pass at, and I didn’t take the chance to go. To make a long story short, a friend and I drove to Chicago, and it wasn’t Riva’s day, nor any other dog’s day for that matter. Sometimes a person should listen to her gut!

I was worried that I was now asking a 12-year-old dog to do two long trips on back-to-back weekends, but of course we had to go to Wisconsin and take a shot, as this could be her last chance. We again drew track number five, and the wait was long. A dog did pass before us, so I knew that the conditions were favorable. Riva pulled me to the start, and I could hardly get her harness on as she was ready to go. She started beautifully, and made the first turn into a parking lot. Later the tracklayer told me she was right on the track as she went by a picnic table. The track kept going in the parking lot, and then Riva cast around for a bit, and all of a sudden I saw the first article in front of us. Hurrah, we had made the moment-of-truth turn!

Riva continued forward in to a bus barn full of busses, and I had a moment of panic that there was no way they would go between all of those parked busses, would they? I also saw no judges behind us, so I convinced Riva that maybe it didn’t go that way, and she obligingly backed out of the bus barn and went around the building. The judges still stood there. At that point I realized what an idiot I was, and that **Riva** was the one who had the nose, not me. She drug me around the building to the point that the track would have come out of the bus barn (and yes, the track did go in there), made another turn, and found another article. This was getting serious! Riva then took me in to a grassy area, and at that point I knew that a lot of what was left had to be vegetated, as so much of the entire first half of the track had been on hard surface. Riva made a turn in the grass, and then she really ran in to a problem. She wanted to go out in to a real trashy area, then she broke off, and started down the side of a building. I questioned her as she just didn’t seem sure, and she again broke off and went almost all the way back to the judges. I re-scented her with the start article, and then she turned and went down a sidewalk on the other side of the building. Then she started pulling hard, and I knew she was dead on the track and my heart started to pound as I knew we had to be close to the end.

At the end of the sidewalk Riva showed loss of track. I knew it didn’t go forward as the judges had told us at the beginning of the test that none of the tracks crossed the main road. I was pretty sure it didn’t go left, as I could see our start flag down that way. But, when I looked right, I saw all of the spectators standing not that far away, along with the start of the next track. So, when Riva went left, I thought, well maybe it does go that way. We had not gone that far, at least to me it didn’t seem that far, when Riva started to break off and I thought we should back up and try to go right at the turn. And then I heard the worst sound in the world, the whistle blowing, and my heart



Photo by Shelly Thorsteinson

## FIRST Quintuple Champion Border Collie



Photo by Tien Tran



Two months later, I was thrilled to get in to another test in Colorado. Riva had been training great all fall. About an hour from the test site, eight hours from home, I got an email on my phone that the test had been cancelled due to **snow** (none of which was visible from where I was at the time). Now I was starting to think that the tracking gods really didn’t like me...

In March of 2012, I entered three tests — one in Kansas City, one in Tulsa, and one in Chicago. Of course, I didn’t get in to the one I wanted to, Kansas City (three hours from my house), and I got in to both Tulsa and Chicago. On the day of the Kansas City test I laid a full-length VST training track for Riva at a local school in 30 mph winds and she nailed it. I was so sad that she couldn’t have done that great work in an actual test that day, but again, at almost 13, I still knew that she could do this, I just knew it, and that even if it never happened, I would always know that she was capable.

On the weekend of March 24-25, I was entered in obedience in Kansas City on Saturday with Rick, who needed just four OTCH points to finish, and in the VST test in Tulsa with Riva on Sunday. When I left home on Friday my husband said to me, “Well, you’ll get an OTCH on Saturday and a CT on Sunday!” and I laughed and said, “You know, it is possible!” never dreaming that it could actually happen. Rick kept up his end of the bargain, earning a Second Place in Open B with 197 ½ and a First Place in Utility with a 198 to finish his OTCH on Saturday! As it was a double obedience trial, we didn’t get out of Kansas City until after 5 p.m. on Saturday, so we didn’t pull in to Tulsa until almost 10 p.m. As Riva had spent most of Saturday in the van, it was a very long day for her, but I could only hope for the best.

Sunday dawned sunny and warm. The draw was in the McDonald’s’ parking lot, and I parked in the shade and tried to

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literally broke on the spot. The track had indeed turned right at the end of the sidewalk, and the final article was right there, next to a rock, and my dream had been just 30 yards away.

I went back to the tracklayer and judges, expecting to hear something like “Oh, how awful, we’re so sad for you, as you were so close, and your dog did a great job,” and then was shocked to have one of the judges tell me in a not kind tone of voice that it was all my fault and that my dog would have passed half an hour ago if I had been paying attention to her.

Then the judge spun on her heel and stalked off. I was stunned. I literally just sat down and cried. The tracklayer was so kind to me, and later sent me a wonderful card telling me how terrific my dog was and how honored she had been to lay a track for Riva. I am still so grateful to her for her kindness. For the next two weeks I would wake up in the middle of the night and see that judge’s face and hear what she said to me, and I had to wonder if finally all of the stars had lined up for Riva to pass, and I blew it.



keep both Riva and I calm as we waited for the draw. The numbers for the various tracks were in plastic Easter eggs. I was the next-to-last person to draw, and from the beginning, I had my eye on a pretty, sky blue egg. I figured somebody else would certainly choose that one, as it was the prettiest color in my opinion! The first four people who drew picked tracks 3, 4, 5, and 6, I couldn't believe it. One person even said, blue is my favorite color, but I'm going to pick this color instead. So that beautiful blue egg was still there when it was my turn, and inside it was Track number 2! I figured that was my first bit of good luck, as it was going to be a warm, 80-degree day.

Riva started beautifully, and shortly down the track, a neighborhood Boxer charged the fence barking at Riva, which badly startled us both. Unknown to me at the time, that happened close to the first turn (it was a short first leg.) I thought the first leg would be longer, and when Riva went down the second leg of the track I wondered if she was just trying to get away from the barking, snarling Boxer. Since she seemed to be tracking, I made the (good) decision to go with her. Riva then entered the opening to a covered parking garage. As she went into the garage, her nose turned to the left, and she then continued forward, all the way through the garage and out the other end. When she came out of the garage, she cast around a bit but didn't commit, so we backed up and worked our way back into the garage. Riva went down the second half of the garage, then broke off and came back, and we worked our way back toward the original opening. Riva's nose then snagged on the crack in the pavement that she had originally indicated when she first came into the building, and off she went. We soon spied an article ahead of us (a crushed wire basket of some kind.) GOOD GIRLIE!

Riva re-started strongly after the first article, and the track came out of the parking garage and after a little casting, Riva hung a right. We then went through some sidewalks and other areas and came to the corner of the building, where Riva turned hard left. Over sidewalks, grass, bricks, and to another article (bandana). Now I was getting nervous.

After the second article, the track crossed a road and went in to a grassy area. Riva showed loss of track and went left. As I followed her I questioned her whether it really went that way, and she broke off and turned around and went right. Now I knew we were on the last leg and my heart was pounding. After our near miss at her last test in October, I didn't think I could take that disappointment again. Riva, too, knew we were at the end, and she was diving on every piece of trash she could find that might be an article. Her tongue was hanging out and she was getting hot. Finally, ahead of us, was a



Photo courtesy of Nebraska Kennel Club

plastic article with the coveted number four on it, and our long training journey culminated in a **pass**, and Riva became a Tracking Champion, an AKC Versatility Champion, and now a **Quintuple** Champion.

An OTCH on Saturday and a CT/Quintuple CH on Sunday – Oh **my**.



I have many people to thank, and I hope I don't forget anybody. First of all the biggest thanks goes to my long suffering husband George who had to listen to more whining than anybody else and deal with the occasional tears after the flunks. Thanks to my friend Dee Nelson who started the VST journey with me and laid many, many tracks for Riva. I especially remember one day that Dee and I tracked with Riva and Powder in the rain at Iowa Western Community College, and we marveled at what our dogs could do. Also thanks to Dee Dee Rose who turned me on to Steve White and the HITT tracking method. Thanks to my friend Sharon Johnson Brewer for the many, many hours spent discussing tracking, VST, and various other subjects – often over a bottle (or two!) of wine. Thanks also to Bert, Linda, Pam, Deb, Norine, and Peggy for listening for literally years about this tracking thing I wanted so badly. **Huge** thanks to Jerry Lewis for his inspiration, his positive energy, and his constant belief that Riva and I could do this. Thanks to Vince Ramirez for the training advice over the years, and who said to me as I went out on Riva's track Sunday morning that my dog deserved to pass. Thanks to Dian Quist Sulek who told me to never give up, and who laid many tracks for Riva and offered up much advice and encouragement. Thanks to the judges Carol Clark and Charlene Dunn, who plotted a fair and doable track, and then gave Riva and I the time and space to be successful. And thanks to the Indian Nations Tracking Club of Tulsa, especially Bob and Gail Brown, for their hard work and wonderful hospitality.

## FIRST Quintuple Champion Border Collie

“I want her to be healthy and happy for as long as possible. And every once in awhile I'll lay her a track, so we can continue to have that wonderful bond. It will be very short and have lots of food on it!”



Photo by Dee Nelson

Obviously, it takes a village to earn a VST!



This is truly the **hardest** thing I have **ever** done in dogs, and this is spoken by the person who was the world's biggest herding idiot 10 years ago. What I went through to get the VST made the HCs look easy!

But the biggest thanks of all goes to my wonderful Riva, my best girl friend and my constant companion. Riva is almost 13 years old, and what she has accomplished is nothing short of incredible. George and I shared a bottle of wine when I got home late on that Sunday night, and we talked about how the time had been growing short for Riva to earn the VST. I told George that I would have walked away from the quest in a heartbeat, but not once did Riva ever say to

me, “You know, I really don't care to do this any more.” She was always up and ready to go when I said “Do you wanna go track?”

And of course the excitement and elation is tinged with a hint of sadness, as the training journey really has come to an end. How lucky was I to have met up with this incredible animal? I hope that she feels the same.



I now want to enjoy every moment with Riva, and never forget all of the things we have done together. Riva has always been a garbage hound, and I jokingly tell friends that now I take the garbage out of the can for her and spread it on the kitchen floor so she doesn't have to go to all of that trouble of knocking the can

over! I want her to be healthy and happy for as long as possible. And every once in awhile I'll lay her a track, so we can continue to have that wonderful bond. It will be very short and have lots of food on it!

But no matter what I do or accomplish in the future, I will never forget how I felt the day that Riva got her VST. I can still re-play every moment of her track in my mind. And when I'm having a bad day, all it takes for me to feel better is to conjure up that track. Thank you Riva, for being the best partner I could have ever had. 🐾

– *Serianne Darnell and Quintuple Champion Riva*

