

# LINES FROM LINDA

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## MIKE ESCH RECEIVES “THE RIGHT STUFF AWARD” FOR A LEGACY OF EXCELLENCE SPANNING FOUR GENERATIONS

BANQUET PHOTOS COURTESY OF KAREN SOEDER

Ours is not simply a sport, it is a shared experience that connects generations past, present, and future. Last month in Tulsa, Oklahoma, the Collie Club of America’s Quarter Century Collie Group honored their National Breed Club President, AKC Judge Mike Esch, with their prestigious “Right Stuff Award.”

In 1969, Vernon and Lora Esch founded Verlor Collies, with their son Mike when he was 13 years old. Their first dog, Algernon, “Algie,” was purchased from the Heinbach family in Peoria, Illinois. He was followed by “Sue” (registered name unknown), and then “Daisy,” Verlor’s Ms Ebony Painter, who was acquired from Mrs. Sturm. Daisy proved to be a pivotal addition; when bred to “Trademark,” she produced Verlor Collies’ first champion in 1974, CH Verlor’s Mister Midnight, “Mister,” owned by Vernon, Lora, and Mike. Mister finished with four majors, earning his final three points under Marcia Keller at the Collie Club of Central New York. His littermate, Verlor’s Golden Persephone, “Goldie,” never finished, but Mike still keeps a few of her photos in his office.

In 1975, Mike convinced his parents to purchase their first Smooth, CH Verlor’s Charmer Of Lick Creek, “Tracey,” from Dorothy Kanter of Dokana Collies, co-owning her with Mrs. Sturm. Tracey, sired by Dokana’s Little Bear out of CH Dokana’s Hoya, was born on November 2, 1974. Her pedigree traced back to influential lines, including CH Black Hawk Of Kasan, Pebble Ledge, Cul Mor, and Kirklyn. Finished in 1976, Tracey quickly became Mike’s heart dog and cemented his passion for the breed.

At 21 years old, Mike piloted Tracey to notable wins in April 1977 at the North Texas Collie Club in Dallas, where she took Best of Opposite Sex to Best of Variety under Judge H.R. Goodrich. The following day, she earned Best of Variety at the Collie Club of America National Specialty under Judge Mrs. Dot Gerth, with CCA President Ralph Morrison present for the occasion.



Mike Esch exemplifies “The Right Stuff”.

The year 1977 was significant not only for Mike's success in the ring but also personally. It marked the beginning of his partnership with Tess Karbatsch of Sujim Collies. The two married on January 7, 1978 in Illinois, and from that union, Signet Collies was born. That same year, Mike joined the Collie Club of America and earned his Bachelor of Science in Agriculture from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

After the 1977 National, Tracey took time off to whelp litters and soon established herself as an exceptional producer. She was inducted into the IVKC Hall of Fame in 1979 as a dam of three or more champions, recognized again in 1982 as a Top Producer, and took first place in Smooth Brood Bitch at the 1982 CCA National.

In 1980, Tracey was bred to CH Sujim's Mr. Onedeful, "Hoss," owned by Jim, Sue, and Teresa Karbatsch, a dog who had earned Reserve Winners Dog in 1975 under Mrs. Laverne Walker. This breeding—and Tracey herself—became a cornerstone of the Signet Collies foundation.

Tess contributed her own foundation bitch, CH Nostalgix The Unholy Grail, "Puppet," to the Signet partnership. Tracey and Puppet shared CH Cul Mor's Bow Street Runner as a sire/grandsire, and as Signet developed, nearly every dog could be traced back to either Tracey (and Verlor) or Puppet (and Sujim). As Tess later wrote on the Signet website, "Mike and Tess cherish their roots and thank their parents for providing such a wonderful foundation on which to build."

And build they did.

From the 1980 Tracey-Hoss litter came CH Verlor's Fascination In Black, "June," owned by Vernon and Lora. After winning Winners Bitch and Best of Winners (Smooth) at the 1980 CCA National under Judges Barbara Schwartz and John Lindeman, June produced CH Signet's Lady Of Verlor, "Megan," who would anchor an extraordinary living six-generation family maintained at Signet. Megan took Second in Smooth Brood Bitch at the 1986 CCA with her get.



Tom Coen, President of the Quarter Century Collie Group, introduced Michelle Esch Brooks to surprise her father



Mike is surrounded by his son, Joe, and daughter, Michelle Esch Brooks, who spoke to honor their dad.



Nadine Beckwith-Olson, QCCG Board Member  
Leslie Jeszewski, Pat Jung

That same year, in 1980, Mike returned to the University of Illinois to earn his Master of Science. Also from the Tracey-Hoss litter came CH Signet's All In The Family, who went on to win Winners Bitch and Best of Winners (Smooth) at the 1981 CCA National.

Another standout, likely from this litter or a repeat breeding, was CH Verlor's Wonderful Lizzy. Sent to São Paulo, Brazil, at just 11 weeks old, Lizzy became the first Smooth Collie in the country. She achieved remarkable success, earning Best in Show, multiple Group placements, and Best in Show at a Working Group Specialty. Lizzy later became an International Champion and was widely recognized in Uruguay and Argentina. Tragically, Tracey passed away in 1983 following a car accident, but her legacy endured through generations of Signet Collies.

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In 1985, Mike and Tess stepped back from professional handling to focus on raising their family. Their son Joe was born in September, followed by their daughter Michelle in March 1988. Though Signet looked different during those years, they remained active in the breed—attending shows when possible and breeding with intention. As Mike’s career with Kraft General Foods led the family across the Midwest and East Coast, Signet continued to grow. Mike later joined Spalding Sports Worldwide as Executive Vice President (1998–2004), followed by a role as Executive Vice President of International Supply Chain at Church & Dwight, where he remained until his retirement in 2021.

Meanwhile, Tess kept Signet active in the show ring and encouraged Mike to become more involved with the Collie Club of America. He served as CCA President from 2000–2004 and again from 2024–2028, and as Treasurer from 2004–2024. Known for his willingness to step up, he also served as 3x Host Show Chair, multi-year National Show Treasurer, and more. Mike became a licensed judge for Collies and Juniors in 2005, and added Shetland Sheepdogs in 2007. He judged at the 2013 CCA National and received the AKC Good Sportsman Award in 2019. In 2024, he was also awarded the CCA Meritorious Service Award.

By taking a larger role within CCA, Mike often joked that he was now the “B Team,” while Tess and the kids were firmly the “A Team” as the kids took on a much larger role in the show ring. Joe and Michelle started showing at the ripe ages of four and five years old, making them third-generation Collie fanciers. CH Signet’s Generations, “Ginny,” became Mike’s next heart dog after Tracey—a compact, spirited tri-color Smooth who dominated the ring and even served as Michelle’s first Juniors dog in 1998.

Ginny’s granddaughter, CH Signet’s Band Of Gold, “Goldie” (b. 1997), sired by CH Marnus Golden Ruler, ROM, earned Best of Opposite Sex to Best Puppy at the 1998 CCA National. A later repeat breeding produced two exceptional littermates: CH Signet’s Twice Is Nice, “Pete,” and CH Signet’s Family Entertainer, “GG.” Pete became Signet’s most influential sire, producing over 40 champions by 2005 and earning numerous accolades, including multiple Groups wins and placements, multiple Awards of Merit at CCA, 2x Best of Opposite Sex wins at both Westminster and the AKC/Eukanuba Invitational, and Best of Opposite Sex to Best of Variety at CCA in 2004. He was also ranked No. 2 in Smooths in 2004. His sister GG became Joe’s dog and a two-time Award of Merit winner, who also helped him to his Best Junior win at the 2003 CCA National. Interestingly, Pete was nearly sold as a pet by Tess—until Mike insisted he was too special to let go. In a similar twist, Tess later insisted on keeping Pete’s first champion offspring, CH Signet’s Study In Black, as Mike wanted to sell him, recognizing the bond forming between Michelle and the dog who would help her rise in Juniors competition.



The future looks bright for “Tess” Brooks



Mike, Michelle, and “Tess” are 3 of 4 generations of the Esch family legacy.

One lesser-known but significant contribution from Mike was his role in advancing Collie Rescue. Prior to 2005, there was no national 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to Collie rescue. During his presidency, Mike helped lay the groundwork for what would become a formalized national effort, culminating in a 2005 CCA vote to fund the Collie Rescue Foundation.

By the time Joe and Michelle left for college, and following Tess’s passing, Signet had produced over 90 champions. In 2011, Mike married Beth and later retired to Nashville, Tennessee.

I’m not sure Mike would have ever dreamed that, 57 years after starting Verlor Collies with his parents, he would be watching his granddaughter in the ring as a fourth-generation Collie fancier. Michelle’s daughter, Teresa Ann “Tess” Brooks (after her late grandmother), now carries on the fourth-generation Esch family legacy. Last month, Tess captured Reserve Best Junior at the Collie Club of America National Specialty and Mike was unanimously elected as President of the National Breed Club.

In 2019, when the Collie Club of America honored Mike with their highly prized Good Sportsmanship Award, his friends described him with the following quotes:

There are some people whose impact can be measured in years of service or lists of accomplishments, but that never quite tells the whole story. Because what truly defines them isn’t what they’ve done, but how they’ve done it.

Calm in the storm, steady when it matters most, and generous with both time and wisdom, Mike is the person others turn to without hesitation. A voice of reason in difficult moments, a steady presence when decisions feel uncertain, and someone who listens first, speaks thoughtfully, and always seeks what is fair. Not for recognition, not for credit, but because it’s simply who he is: to show up, to guide, to bring clarity where there is confusion, and to lead with integrity, fairness, and genuine heart.

As Samuel Johnson once said, “The true measure of a man is how he treats someone who can do him absolutely no good.” And in this case, that measure is clear in every quiet act, every steady decision, and every moment of unwavering dedication. And when we talk about what it means to have “the right stuff,” it isn’t about titles or recognition, it’s about character, consistency, and the way someone shows up for others, time and time again.

And that is exactly what “the right stuff” looks like. ☺