

SAINT BERNARD

Breed First - Champion (CH)



CH Don

John P. Haines

By John Cox

The quest to find the first Champion Saint Bernard in the United States has been quite a road to travel. Going back in time to the beginning of dog shows in the United States, one finds very few records on file. Keep in mind, the early kennel clubs record keeping was in their beginning stages, and the American Kennel Club (AKC) was *not* even in existence in the [late 1870s when dog shows started up in America](#). The AKC was formed in 1884 and in [1885 the first dog shows under the AKC Bench Show Rules were held](#).

[To put this in a historical time frame:](#) The 1870s was the decade following the American Civil War. We are talking stagecoach days! The first transcontinental railroad was completed in 1869, and Orville and Wilbur's first flight was in 1903--a quarter of a century [later!](#) During these early years of showing dogs, there were very few shows each year and the difficulties of travel further limited the number of shows dogs and kennel men could attend. Travel was very difficult; dogs on the West Coast did not travel to the East Coast or Mid-West, or vice versa.

Championships were awarded (pre-AKC) so trying to locate the first American champion seemed like an impossible task. There are no records of championship titles being published (that can be found) prior to the AKC! My research started at the American Kennel Club Library in New York City with the earliest AKC *GAZETTES*, Show Catalogs and Studbooks. Below is what I uncovered:

[1. The earliest AKC GAZETTE was published in the year 1889.](#) The first American champions (pre-AKC) were grand fathered in and some were published in this first *GAZETTE*. To find all the early champions is a near impossible task at this time. One would have to have access to *all of the very early show catalogs ever published* and compile a list of *all the dog's first place wins* that met the early championship criteria of the day. Of course, you would need marked catalogs to accomplish such a task! Then there were shows given by county fairs, poultry associations, etc., where *sometimes* wins were counted. These shows may have been held one year and not the next. Plus, who knows for sure *if* there was a show catalog at some of these shows.

Can you believe it was up to the owner to keep track of the dog's first place wins, and that [after three first place wins were achieved the dog was considered a champion?](#) Also, a dog could become a champion and not even be registered! Again, this was at the beginning of dog registries in the United States (pre-AKC) and many changes have been made over the years. It is hard to visualize today exactly what took place and how records were kept (if any) for the dog shows in the 1870s and early 1880s.

[2. The Westminster KC \(WKC\) predates the AKC and their show catalogs were an intricate part of the research at the AKC Library. The first WKC catalog on file is dated 1877](#) and they progress forward year-by-year, plus many were even marked

The WKC was the big show of the year in the United States so many of the early Saint Bernards were shown in New York City--especially in the Challenge class! Very few of the other kennel club catalogs on file showed Saint Bernards in a Challenge class.

3. When a dog completed their championship it could then be shown in the Challenge class (somewhat like our Best of Breed class today). On the dog show entry form, the owner would list the dog's wins and that list was published in the show catalog. It was from the Challenge classes, in the very early show catalogs, that I was able to find some of the *earliest* American champions and dates of their first place wins. There is really no way to tell if we are missing a few Saint Bernards which may have finished their championship and were never shown in a Challenge class or never produced a litter. That information is lost in time!

4. Quite a few champions were also discovered in the early Stud Books as sires and dams of newly registered get, but the actual 1880s year date of their championship is not yet known. Saint Bernards first showed up in AKC studbook Volume II (1885) with five names published. (To view the first five registered Saint Bernards in the Stud Book, go to the PDF file on this Archive page.) This first studbook was actually titled The National American Kennel Club Studbook. The National American Kennel Club (not AKC) started keeping records on dogs in America before the AKC. These early studbooks were grand fathered in when the AKC was formed in late 1884.

5. The first three Saint Bernards to show up in the Challenge class were in the April 1881 Westminster show catalog. They were CH Don, CH Judy and CH Turbo. CH Don is found in earlier show catalogs of the late 1870s winning his class firsts. CH Judy also was published in these early catalogs. CH Turbo was not found in any prior show catalogs and he was listed as Swiss-bred at the Hospice in Switzerland. Maybe the Championship was from another nation; or maybe the name was misspelled as there is a CH Turgo around this era. Another little mystery lost in time. CH Don, CH Judy and CH Turbo predate any champion found in the studbooks.

6. Therefore, since CH Don was published in the *earliest known* show catalogs in America, plus having his three first place wins completed in 1879 (at the very beginning of dog shows in America), the logical conclusion is to crown CH Don as the FIRST American-bred Saint Bernard Champion, doing so in the year 1879.

7. CH Judy became the first American-bred Saint Bernard Champion bitch, in the year 1880, based on the same logic as above. An interesting note, CH Don and CH Judy were brother and sister but from different litters, Don being older.

Our Championship, Sire and Dam databases are very complete considering the Saint Bernard was one of the first breeds to be registered in America well over a century ago. I would even venture to say our databases are the most complete of any early-recognized breed of dog in America. Remember, the time frame mentioned in the second paragraph--a decade after the American Civil War, stagecoach days, and a quarter of a century before the first flight at Kittyhawk!

If you know of other information that will prove the above incorrect, please write to me at:
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CH Don

John P. Haines



(Whelped April 14, 1876)

Watercolor by Alexander Pope, from the AKC's collection.

First Saint Bernard to Earn An American Championship

1879

Sire: Chamounix (imported from Switzerland)

Dam: Alpe

Prize Winnings

First, Baltimore	1878
Second, New York	1878
First, New York	1879
First, Boston	1879
Special, Boston	1879
Second, Philadelphia	1879
Special, Philadelphia	1879