

US-5, IVAN BALABANOV

Congratulations on making the 2022 FMBB Team! What does it mean to you to be representing the organization, especially being it's President?

I'm not sure it changes anything for me. I am always very passionate about the sport and our team. This year we have a super cool team with great dogs and the combined experience of the handlers that I don't think has ever been matched. All 6 teams and our team captain are really really good at this. Of course in this sport, we need the Schutzhund Gods to be in our corner but I am very optimistic and cannot wait for us to get to Greece to represent AWMA!

Tell me about your dog J'Ice Ot Vitosha (Ice). We know he is a top level IGP dog but tell me what he's like at home. When did you know he was special? What would you say is his strongest attribute?

Ice is my boy! I have been in dog sports and breeding Malinois since 1989. This is a long time. I have always competed with dogs that I personally have bred and trained using my Training Without Conflict system. Ice is 7th generation from my Ot Vitosha Malinois breeding. Trainers say "His father and his father ...have been champions" but in our case, this is the truth and I cannot express how special of a feeling this is. Ice is a house dog, he is social and stable, I take him anywhere when possible with me. He sleeps on the bed often (pssst!). I can talk about him for a long time, he is affectionate and crazy at the same time as most good Malinois are. Between Covid and life, in general, I was not able unfortunately to show who he is in the last few years but 2022 is here, and cannot wait any longer for us to hit the competition fields!



Ivan and Ice at the 2021 AWMA National Championship.

What do you look for when you are picking out your next sport dog prospect? Do you prefer to start your dogs from 8 weeks old or do you like to take on a slightly older dog?

As I already mentioned I am a breeder who trains following my own training concepts. My dogs Django, Qenny, Ebor and now Ice I did sell as puppies and around 10 months old on average for one reason or another they came back to me, and I decided to train and compete with all of them eventually all becoming multiple champions. I do want to one day to select a puppy from my breeding but it is not a must. I know my lines and I feel very confident with selection and training. For now, Ice has all of my time, focus, and love.



Ice at the 2021 DVG National Championship

What advice would you give to a young person or an adult amateur starting out in the sport? What dog or life advice would you give yourself 10 years ago?

The competition landscape is changing always and this is a good thing, having said that there are trends and new training ideas but the learning theories are still the same. Anyone who wants to compete at a high level has to be extremely careful learning from YouTube and social media. I would say the same about the "seminar hoppers". Do sound research and look for someone that is willing to coach you, you need a coach with accomplishments, not bragging statistics. Someone that is Extremely good in the art of dog training is very important. Your coach should be able to explain things in a simple way without fancy jargon, it's not about that. This is the hardest part in my opinion. A coach can tell you if the dog you have is capable, if you are capable, what are the limitations and challenges, and one more thing as an observation - The people who truly succeed in this sport are irrationally passionate about it! It takes time (a lot of time) and there will be all sorts of sacrifices throughout the journey but it's worth it.

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Since our sport is a 3 phase one, do you have a favorite phase? And why?

IGP is a brilliant sport, I hope no dramatic changes come in the future because it's just perfect the way it is! Although this question comes up often, it is very unfair to ask to give an answer. It takes a dog with not one but several really important qualities, it also takes a training approach that acknowledges the differences between tracking, obedience, and protection, this is what is so cool about this sport. Now if I really have no choice but to give you an answer I will say Obedience is the basis of communication between the dog and trainer and if there are "glitches", they will be exposed in the other phases ...

Ivan, you are a role model for so many, not just in the sport of IGP, but in so many dog training disciplines. You and Ice have had an incredible partnership together that we have all enjoyed witnessing. Looking back at your dog training career, what is your proudest moment and why?

Ouch, another hard to answer question for me. With my first female Nakita I placed 12th at the FCI early 90's, at the time it was the best placing USA team. With her I also was part of the very first FMBB and I was still greatly experimenting what works and what doesn't. She became the foundation Ot Vitosha female and all my dogs go back to here somewhere. But then there is Django. By the age of 3 he was AWMA, AWDF and USCA Champion, he was an extremely talented dog, the same year he became FMBB vice-champion and also received the youngest dog in the competition trophy. Unfortunately, he got injured and couldn't recover fully but he...

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...lived to be 16 and he has a special place in my heart. Next was Qenny in the same year he won AWDF, FCI, and the FMBB he was not old but I decided to stop since there was nothing else to be accomplished and I wanted him to walk away from the competition proudly. Sooo no I do not have one moment, I enjoy every competition and every training session fully and sometimes I do stop and remind myself that this isn't a dream but my life. I started back in a hardcore communist country, I had to escape to chase my dreams but this is a different story.



Finally, where can the people reading this find you online?

I have accounts on all social media platforms, My kennel website is www.malinois.com. My school for dog trainers you can find here <https://www.trainingwithoutconflict.com/>

Thank you for taking the time out of your busy day to chat with us!

