



Winston was found wandering the streets of the south side of San Antonio, Texas at just four months old. He was living in a culvert and rummaged through a dumpster for food before Jeff and Kristen Wells rescued him.



Jeff Wells saw an agility competition on his television and had the idea that his dog, Winston might be a perfect fit for the sport. Winston has quickly succeeded against top competition.



Winston has since graduated to the masters level of agility competition—the highest available level. He is on track to qualify for the national championships.

Two years ago, Jeff and Kristen Wells' dog, Winston, was living a vastly different life than he is now. As the Great Freeze made its way through the southside of San Antonio, Texas, a then four month old Winston was living in a culvert on the street. His only source of food was from a nearby dumpster, a notch was missing from his ear, and he hobbled in the cold on a broken leg. Fast forward to 2023 and Winston's life is the complete antithesis of how it started. The Wells' dog has developed a reputation as a victorious agility competitor, and will now be seen on the big screen, having just wrapped filming on his first movie.

Jeff and Kristen Wells have long been animal lovers, being heavily involved in the American Saddlebred industry. Kristen had grown up showing in the equine community before taking a brief hiatus during her college years. She returned to the show ring after marrying Jeff.

"When we got married, I promised her that we would get her back into it and we didn't waste any time," Jeff said. "We got married in 2011 and we bought her mare in 2011 from Jim Lowry and she has been showing ever since."

That mare, CH Elegant Mystery, has become the foundation of the Wells' breeding program at their Stonewell Farm. Both Kristen and Jeff are committed to developing and exhibiting their Saddlebreds under the direction of Steve and Tiffany Wheeler at Autumn Hills Farm. They additionally organize the All American Cup and work to further promote the breed. While the Wells' have had great success with their Saddlebreds, it is their other four-legged companion, Winston that has been in the spotlight recently.

Jeff and Kristen Wells split their time between San Antonio, Texas, and Kentucky. They happened to be in Texas in February of 2021 when Jeff came across a post regarding a stray dog. A woman had found him and concluded that he would have a grim outcome if he didn't get off the streets during the Great Freeze.

"I had responded and said, 'Ok if you can catch him, then I will come get him and at least we will get him off the street,'"

Winston

The Rescue:

From the Streets of the South Side to the Big Screen

BY SARA PIZZUTO





Winston worked on set in New Mexico with Jeff at his side. The film is set to premiere this coming summer.



Jeff Wells explained that everyone should take a chance on a stray or rescue dog as Winston has enriched the lives of both he and his wife, Kristen.



A friend of Jeff Wells thought that Winston would be the perfect fit for the short film, *Only One Died*. The movie, set in Iraq, tells the story of soldiers that befriend a dog during the war.

Autumn Hills, we would have not made it this far because we wouldn't have had a place to train."

Jeff and Winston trained at Autumn Hills Farm for up to four months before they encountered another dilemma. Though they had a new agility set to practice with, they still were missing the contact obstacles, which are the bigger obstacles, like the dog walk, used in agility. Jeff explained that it didn't make sense to purchase these obstacles as they cost thousands of dollars plus, he didn't have any place to put them.

"I kept calling around to trainers and still, no one would respond so finally I said screw it, let's go register for an AKC competition so at least we can get on the obstacles," he said. "I didn't know how we were going to do, but at least we could train and use the competition, which they call a trial, to train."

In the world of agility competition, dogs need to turn in a perfect run in order to get a "Q" or qualification. They receive a green ribbon for qualifying and then an additional ribbon depending on how they place. Winston and Jeff entered their first agility competition in February of 2022.

"I took him to a trial and we miraculously qualified and won his first run that he ever did," Jeff said. "However, for the rest of the weekend we proceeded to fail every other run."

Despite the failures, Jeff found the trial to be a worthwhile experience as Winston's performances were noticed by Catherine Laria and Debbie Moore, two of the top agility dog trainers in Texas. Winston began training with them and made impressive strides. Agility competition has different levels that are designated to each dog based on their skills. Everyone begins as a novice, proceeds to the open level, then the excellent level and finally masters, which is the highest level a dog can reach.

"It made a big difference quickly," Jeff said. "We did our next trial about a month later and he was almost perfect for the trial. It was crazy the difference in just a month. It took him about 8 competitions before he was a masters, which is crazy. He has been running masters since October. Now, he is on track to qualify for the national championships. The ironic thing is that when we did our first competition, we won our first one and then had 14 straight failures. He just had 22 straight qualifications before snapping the streak, which is crazy. At his level, you can't have one point off. You have to be perfect. You can't hit a bar. You can't go the wrong way. You can't do anything. He is really smart, and we have a good bond."

Winston's agility skills have not only been seen during each agility trials, but they were also needed on the set of the short film, *Only One Died*. The movie, set in Iraq, tells the story of soldiers that befriend a dog during the war. Jeff Wells' friend, Cameron Ring, was an actor in the film and was the one that recommended that Winston join the cast.

"The producer was evaluating the cast and they already had a dog picked out but when the producer evaluated the dog, he decided he didn't like the dog because it was a purebred dog and they don't have purebred dogs in Iraq," Jeff explained. "So Cameron was talking to the producer and said, 'You should check this dog out.' So they go on social media, because Winston has his own Instagram and TikTok and Cameron showed the pro-

ducer his profile and the producer goes, 'That's the dog I want.'"

Jeff and Winston flew out to Roswell, New Mexico—the location of the filming. Jeff explained that though Winston had no prior movie experience, he quickly adjusted to life on set. The days were long and tedious, but Winston worked well alongside the actors.

"The producer would come out and say, 'Ok Jeff, for this next scene I need Winston to run around this building, and crawl under a bush and jump over this thing,'" Jeff said. "And I would have like two minutes to train him and the next thing you know there's the actors and there's the cameras and then he would have to do it. During the first day he was a little tentative. But after that he kind of got the feel for it. Just like with agility, he has about 30 seconds where he has to do his job and it's same thing when he was on set. He learned that that was his job to do whatever he was told to do, and he is really smart. He learned those things very quickly."

The filming for *Only One Died* has since wrapped. The trailer will be out later in the spring, with the film to follow that will be approximately 20-30 minutes in length. Jeff explained that the finished product will then be submitted to multiple film festivals in the short film category. The film will have to a chance to be eligible for an academy award if it finishes first at one of the festivals.

In the meantime, Winston will continue to focus on his agility with the hope of qualifying for the national championships—an opportunity that Jeff explained would be a full circle moment considering the agility national championships are what he was initially watching when he first thought that Winston would be a good fit for competition. Fans of Winston can follow along with his training and competition through his Instagram and Tiktok under the handle @airwinston. However, with an already full schedule, Jeff said that it is important that Winston takes time to simply enjoy his life.

"He is still so young," he said. "He is mature for his age mentally probably because he grew up on the street. He can really do about anything. But it is really important for me to make sure that he has time to just be a dog. We love just taking him hiking and he loves to chase squirrels and chase deer and goes for rides. It is a balance, but he really does like the agility. As far as the movies go, if an opportunity presents itself, great. But we are not actively pursuing that. He is more of an action type dog. It would have to be the right fit for him if another movie did come along."

Regardless of his next achievements, Winston has a home for life with the Wells family. They took a chance on a puppy in an unfortunate situation and watched as he flourished in their care.

"I fully believe that if Winston could talk or speak, he would say that he runs for all those dogs who can't—who will never be given the opportunity because they live on the street," Jeff said. "I think he would also just say to give a dog a chance. There are a lot of pre-conceived notions with street dogs or with rescue dogs and a lot of people will only go the purebred route. But I would say that any dog if given the proper love, training, and attention, can really perform miracles. It may not be agility. It might just be a great family dog, or a good buddy, or a service dog."

Jeff served in the military as part of the army and was in combat. He explained that his bond with Winston has been immensely helpful to him in his daily life. The dog that was once a malnourished and injured puppy has led a full life as both an accomplished agility athlete and as a cast member in a short film. However, he has also enriched the life of his owners, who are simply blessed to have him. The role of a family member is perhaps Winston's greatest yet.

"The connection that we have, I guarantee you helps me more than any bit that I could possibly help him," Jeff said. "What we do gives me a purpose and a focus and a mission and it helps me just as much if not more than anything we have ever done for him. And I think for other veterans or for other people out there that just need a companion, you can go adopt a dog out there for free. You can take a dog off the street or out of a shelter and they can change your life."

Jeff said. "I didn't ask permission from Kristen or anything. The woman called me and said, 'I have got him in the garage. Can you come and get him right now?' I said yes. The roads were treacherous at that point. They don't have salt or things like that in Texas. So it took me a long time but I had my truck and I made my way down to the south side of town. I picked him up, brought him home, and surprised Kristen, who was very surprised."

The Wells' new dog, Winston, adjusted to his new life, healing from his broken leg and enjoying time off the street. It was soon apparent that Winston was fast and enjoyed jumping. As fate would have it, Jeff happened to come across the AKC National Agility Championship while flipping through channels on his television. He thought that Winston might be a good fit for this type of competition.

"Winston had a lot of energy," Jeff said. "So dogs like that, kind of like horses, need a job and so I thought it could be something good for him and good for me."

Jeff phoned different dog agility trainers in both Kentucky and Texas—trying to inquire about a trainer for Winston. He called each trainer several times but never received a call back, so he was forced to get creative. Jeff ultimately ordered a book from Amazon and decided to attempt to teach Winston how to compete in agility himself in September of 2021. He collected some cones and PVC pipe and made a makeshift course in his backyard. This set up worked temporarily but proved difficult as the cold weather set in again. Jeff enlisted the help of Steve and Tiffany Wheeler, the trainers of his Saddlebreds.

"Tiffany said we could train in the barn," Jeff said. "So Winston and I would go over there at night, after dark, and we would train in the barn. Eventually Tiffany ended up getting us as a present, our first official agility set. This big package showed up in the mail and I opened it, and it was a real agility set that had jumps and a tunnel. Had it not been for Steve and Tiffany and