



FROM JOHANNESBURG TO THE WORLD STAGE: KNOX'S JOURNEY TO THE FCI WORLD DOG SHOW, BOLOGNA 2026



There are dreams you dare to dream, and then there are the ones you never even allow yourself to consider. For us, representing South Africa at the FCI World Dog Show in Bologna, Italy, fell firmly into that second category – until it didn't.

After Knox was awarded KUSA Showdog of the Year 2024/2025, the honour came with an extraordinary invitation: to compete in the FCI World Challenge of Top Dogs, where the finest show dogs from 57 nations gather on the ultimate world stage. It was Knox's breeder, Guido Schäfer, who first planted the seed and refused to let it die. With his encouragement, his belief in Knox, and the overwhelming support of our community, what had once seemed impossible began to feel inevitable.

This is the story of how we got there – every kilometre, every plate of pasta, and every moment of pride and heartbreak along the way.

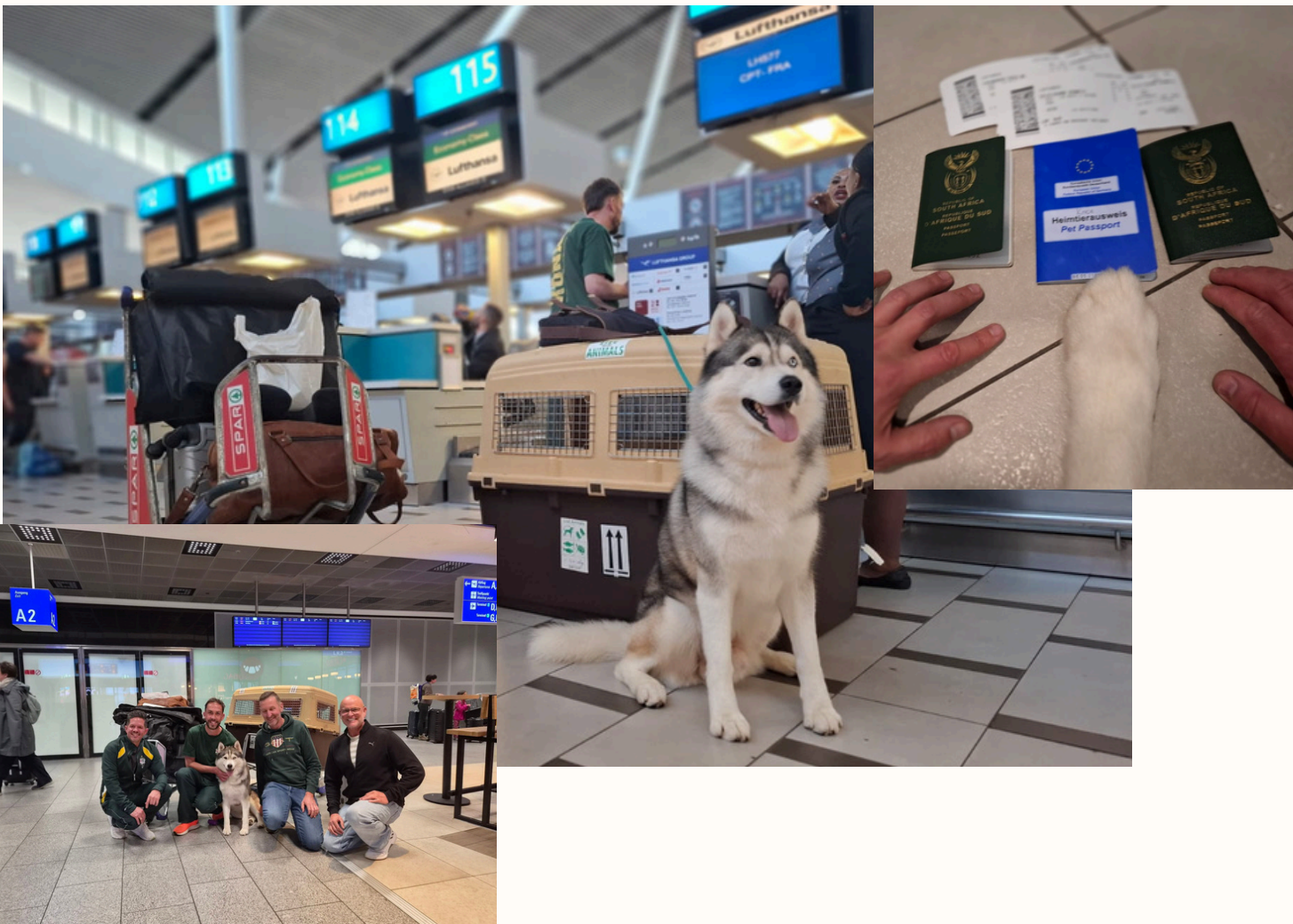


THE JOURNEY BEGINS: CAPE TOWN TO FRANKFURT

Our adventure kicked off on Monday, 1st June, when we drove from Johannesburg to Cape Town. This routing wasn't arbitrary – flying Knox out of Cape Town allowed us to travel with him as excess baggage on Lufthansa, whereas departing from OR Tambo would have meant sending him as cargo. For a dog like Knox, that simply wasn't an option we were willing to take. (not to mention the price difference).

On Tuesday, 2nd June, Knox, Warren and I boarded our Lufthansa flight from Cape Town to Frankfurt. Waiting for us on the other side was Guido – and his partner Klaus – for what turned out to be a deeply emotional reunion between breeder and dog. It was also the first time we had met in person, and the warmth and ease of that meeting felt as though we'd known each other for years.

We drove to their home in Kaisersesch, a charming town in the Rhineland-Palatinate region, where we spent the day grooming the dogs, catching our breath, and enjoying a wonderful home-cooked meal prepared by Klaus. It was the perfect calm before the storm.



THE DRIVE THROUGH THE ALPS: GERMANY TO ITALY

Wednesday brought an early start and a drive that would become one of the most memorable parts of the trip – for better and for worse.

The route from Germany, through Switzerland and into Italy, should have taken approximately nine hours. It took over fourteen. A bottleneck at the tunnel connecting Switzerland to Italy reduced traffic to a trickle, with only a limited number of vehicles permitted through at any one time. After sitting in standstill traffic for what felt like an eternity, Guido made the bold call to take the scenic route – up and over the Swiss Alps.



The decision was inspired. Even in the height of summer, snow and ice clung to the mountain peaks around us. The scenery was breathtaking in the truest sense of the word – vast, silent, and humbling. It was the kind of beauty that reminds you why adventures are worth having.

We finally arrived in Bologna that evening, checked into our hotel, and rewarded ourselves with pasta and Aperol Spritz at a local pizzeria. Italy had officially begun.

FRIDAY, 5TH JUNE: THE ENCI CLUB SHOWS

Our first taste of competition came on Friday, with two ENCI Club Shows as a warm-up for the main event.

Nothing quite prepares you for the scale of an international show of this magnitude. The venue was enormous, and the variety of breeds on display was unlike anything we had encountered in South Africa. What struck me most, though, was not the sheer spectacle but the temperaments of the dogs – American Akitas, Dogo Argentinos, Neapolitan Mastiffs, all moving in close proximity to one another without a hint of aggression. A testament to the breeders, handlers, and judges who uphold the highest standards of the sport worldwide.

We were joined by Guido, Klaus, Dagmar and Janine – new friends who quickly felt like old ones – as we set up our corner of the hall and prepared to show.



One immediate challenge: the rings were indoors, on carpet. Coming from South Africa's outdoor grass shows, this was a significant adjustment. Knox and I slipped and slid through our practice run until our team came to the rescue with wet towels. Apparently, water on the paws and shoes outperforms any non-slip spray on the market. You learn something new every day.

When the moment came, we entered the ring with a blend of enthusiasm, excitement and nerves. Knox rose to the occasion, as he always does, placing 4th in Champion Dog at the first show and 3rd at the second, against strong international competition. A wonderful result for our first international outing – and the confidence boost we needed heading into Saturday.

After the shows, we returned to the hotel where we were joined by Michaela and Andreas, Guido's close friends who breed Afghan Hounds. Dinner, laughter, and more Aperol followed, as we savoured the evening before the big day.



SATURDAY, 6TH JUNE: THE WORLD DOG SHOW

There is no adequate way to prepare yourself for a World Dog Show. You think you can imagine it – and then you walk in.

Siberians were judged from 8am, with males and females running simultaneously in adjacent rings. The entry figures told the story: 199 Siberian Huskies. It was a breathtaking sight, a sea of our beloved breed from every corner of the globe. When Knox and I entered the ring for the Champion Dog class, the scale of the competition became immediately, viscerally real. There were so many dogs that the class had to be split into groups, with 25 champion dogs entered and 21 present. Round after round, Knox and I held our ground.

We were ultimately placed 3rd in a very strong lineup. I would be lying if I said there wasn't a flicker of disappointment – every competitor steps into that ring believing in their dog – but the pride far outweighed anything else. To stand in that ring, in that company, with Knox conducting himself with the grace and confidence that has always defined him, was a moment I will carry with me forever.

THE FCI WORLD CHALLENGE OF TOP DOGS: A BITTERSWEET EXPERIENCE

The afternoon brought the preliminary judging for the FCI World Challenge of Top Dogs – the competition for which Knox had originally received his invitation, representing South Africa alongside the top dogs of 56 other nations.

I will be candid: this part of the day was a disappointment, and not through any fault of the dogs or their handlers or the judges.



Fifty-seven national champions, each having earned the honour of representing their country on the world stage – what an extraordinary gathering of dogs and the dedicated people behind them. Events like these are a celebration of everything we love about this sport, and the privilege of being part of it is not lost on us for a single moment.

That said, it is precisely because of how much this competition means to all who attend that we gently raise a few thoughts for consideration. The very small rings for the preliminary judging, with approximately 19 dogs per group, made it genuinely difficult for many handlers to show their dogs as they deserved to be seen. In the main ring: With countries called alphabetically and finalists selected during preliminary judging, some teams found themselves with very little opportunity to make a full impression.

We share this not with any bitterness, but with deep respect for what this event represents and a sincere hope to see it grow into everything it has the potential to be. The world's best dogs are in that hall. The world's most passionate handlers, owners and breeders are at ringside. Every single one of them has worked tirelessly for the honour of being there. Giving each dog and each country the very best chance to shine is not just a logistical consideration – it is a tribute to the extraordinary effort that every competitor has made to stand on that floor. We believe in this event, we are grateful to have been part of it, and we look forward to seeing it flourish.

SUNDAY, 7TH JUNE: BEST IN SHOW

Knox traveled back to Germany with Guido and Klaus, while Warren and I spent the morning exploring Bologna's historic city centre – a stunning maze of medieval arcades, terracotta rooftops, and, naturally, more pasta and Aperol.

We returned to the show in the afternoon for Best in Show, and it was spectacular. The ENCI delivered an event of extraordinary scale and production, a fitting finale to a week that had given the dog world everything it deserved.

Kudos to every volunteer, organiser, and judge who made it possible.



VENICE: A WELL-EARNED ADVENTURE

On Monday, with the show behind us, Warren and I made our way to Venice – a journey that involved slightly more trains and ferries than anticipated, including one rather last-minute platform change that had us sprinting through the Mestre station. We got there and arrived at Venice San Lucia.

Our hotel was everything one could hope for: a balcony overlooking a canal, the gentle sound of water below, and the whole impossible beauty of Venice stretching out in every direction.

We spent three glorious days making the most of every moment. No visit to Venice is complete without Piazza San Marco, and it did not disappoint – the grandeur of the Basilica, the pigeons, the history layered into every cobblestone. We wandered through narrow alleyways that opened unexpectedly onto stunning squares and bridges, each turn revealing something new. The highlight, without question, was a gondola ride through the canals – gliding silently beneath ancient bridges, past crumbling palazzo walls, with the gondolier navigating the waterways as though time itself had slowed down. It was pure magic. Lunches and dinners at the most charming canal-side restaurants rounded out each day perfectly, with the Italian menu and the wine list both receiving our full attention.

With our time running short, we made one final travel decision: rather than take the train back to Germany as originally planned, a quick check revealed we could fly from Venice to Frankfurt in one and a half hours. After the epic journey through the Alps, the lengthy competition days, and the emotional rollercoaster of the week, that was a very easy choice.



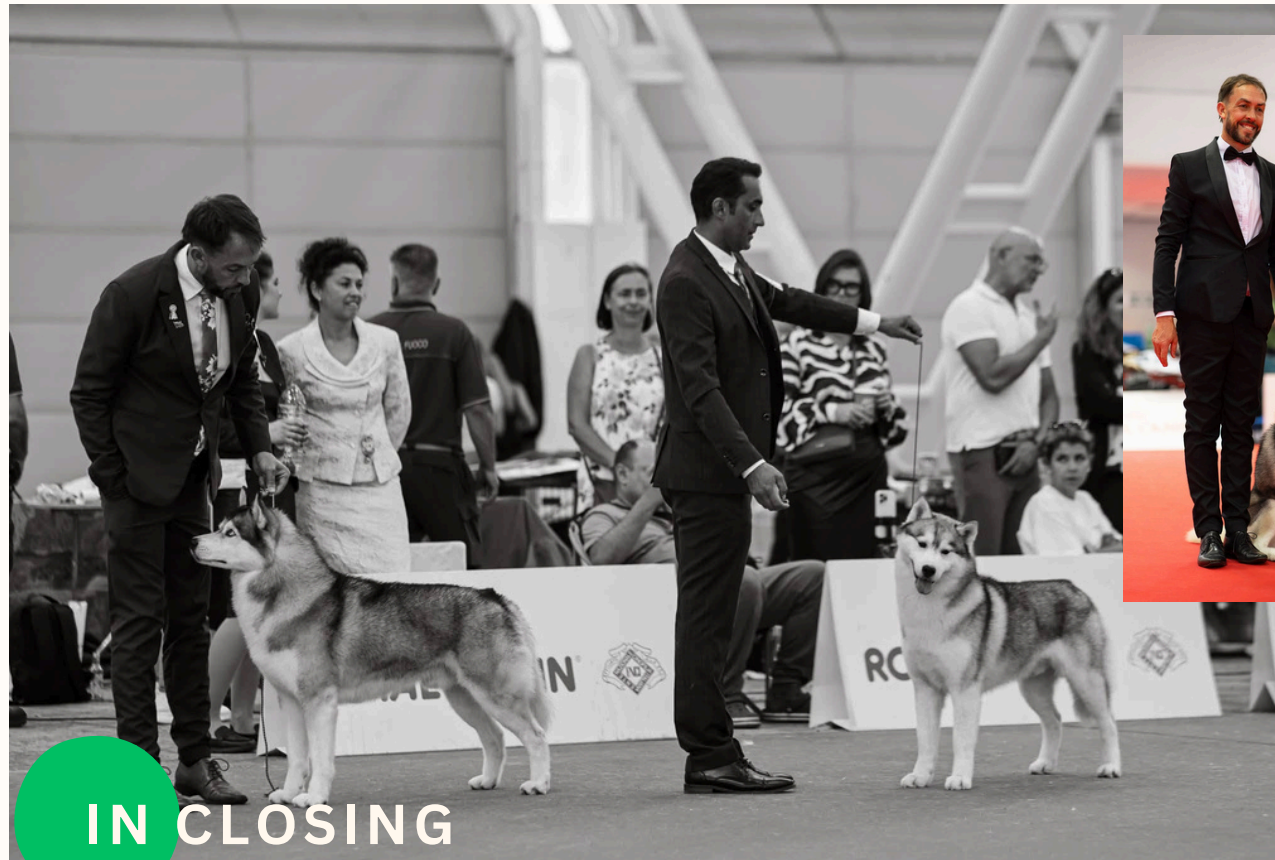


THE JOURNEY HOME

Guido handled all of Knox's paperwork with characteristic precision and care, checking him in with the agent in Germany for his flight to Johannesburg. Knox, ever the seasoned traveller, made the journey home without complaint.

Warren and I met Guido at Frankfurt Airport to catch our flight to Cape Town – Guido was heading to Oudtshoorn to judge, because apparently a week-long international odyssey is simply not enough for some people.

On Friday, 13th June, we touched down in South Africa. The contrast could not have been more stark: 30°C sunshine in Italy, straight into the chill of a South African winter. Knox was collected by our dear friend Joy Tyrrell and returned safely home, no doubt ready for a very long nap.



IN CLOSING

This trip – this dream we never quite dared to dream – would not have happened without the support of an entire community.

To everyone who donated, encouraged, believed, and cheered us on from afar: thank you. From the bottom of our hearts. Knox carried all of you with him into every ring, and we hope we did you proud.

To Guido and Klaus: you made this possible, and you made it unforgettable. The generosity, the warmth, the mountain roads – we are so grateful.

And to Knox – still the most magnificent dog I have ever had the privilege of standing next to in a ring. The world got to see what we have always known.

Until the next adventure.