



Assessing the Polls

By Lisa Dubé-Forman

The fact of the matter is the data does not lie. Not even AKC judges believe their assessments on dogs are consistent with one another. Even more, AKC Judges do not believe that Breeder-Judges, if given twelve to fifteen dogs of their breed to rate excellent, good, fair, or poor, would rate them all the same. Additionally, AKC judges do not believe that AKC Executive Field Representatives are qualified to pass judgement on all breeds despite the Representative's role is to evaluate judging applicant's performances.

This data was captured from questionnaires submitted to AKC Judges over the course of 28 years by the Senior Conformation Judges Association (SCJA), a judges association composed of veteran and novice judges alike. In 1984, the SCJA instituted a practice of submitting insightful questionnaires to its members via paper-based surveys. The SCJA's results bear out better than average survey response rates while next in importance is the gravity of the answers. In some cases, its members were nearly unanimous in their answers to the aforesaid questions and, importantly, the replies have remained consistent and relatively unchanged over the decades of questionnaires. To illustrate, 1986 participation rate was 53% or 453 responses out of approximately 850 members. 1988 resulted in having 42% of its 872 members responding, and the 1989 questionnaire results were based on 462 signed responses, or more than 40% of the SCJA members. After this decade, the SCJA decided not to continue publishing its total membership numbers as a rejoinder to an AKC official request to obtain the SCJA's membership list. The SCJA refused to hand over this proprietary information, and although it does not publicize proceeding membership numbers, it is enough to say that members' motivation levels remained consistent with excellent sampling numbers to further polls.

Why do these questionnaires matter? Let us look at the challenging results. We begin with a look back in time to 1986, when the polling began. The replies vary little over the course of decades. As a younger generation judge, the overwhelming agreement to one of these sustained questions causes not just wonderment, but I am puzzled why veteran judges have been putting up

with the status quo for so very, very long. I fully appreciate the commitment they have given to this lifestyle over the decades as their seniority should afford authority and a voice to suggest or make changes. If none are forthcoming, with all due respect, what immediately comes to mind is a contemporary idiom: The definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over again while expecting different results.

Member judges were asked if they were convinced of AKC Field Representatives competence in evaluating their judging, as well as their procedure. In 1986, 86% answered "No." In 1989, when asked if they believed AKC Representatives, used to evaluate the applicants, are qualified to pass judgement on all breeds, 93% replied "No". In 1991, replies remained consistent with 89% stating "No." In 1993, that number increased to 100%; in 1996, 96% said no. In 1998, this number was 96%, and in 2007, even then 98% replied "No."

In 1989, member judges were asked if they believed Group judges are qualified to pass judgement on another judge's qualifications on all the breeds within their approved Group. In 1989, a resounding 94% replied "No," and in 1991, 88% once more replied "No". A more provocative question was set forth to member judges asking if they believed that Breeder-Judges, given twelve to fifteen dogs of their breed to rate excellent, good, fair, or poor; would they rate them all the same. In 1991, 99% of the member judges replied "No". In 1993, 98% of member judges replied "No." Today, reportedly 99% of the member judges responding to the January 2014 poll replied "No."

Backtracking to 1996, the judges organization

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resolved to develop this last question further. The SCJA wanted to explore if member judges were critical, not just of other breeder-judges, but also of other Group judges and AKC Field Representatives regarding quality of selections. The question was again posed to the member judges asking if all three of these categories, Breeder-Judges, Group Judges, AKC Field Representatives if given twelve to fifteen dogs of a breed to rate excellent, good, fair, or poor, would rate them all the same. The results were noteworthy insofar as 96% of the respondents stated not only Breeder-Judges, but 98% of Group judges, and finally, 99% of Field Reps would not rate the dogs all the same.

The augmentation of the original question clearly shows that there is no willful vilification of a group nor targeting of persons, such as AKC's Field Representatives, as the SCJA's data found out. The consistent opinion-poll evidence makes known a truth; that judges are as critical of one another as they are of AKC Field Representative's supposed qualifications in rating dogs. Perhaps these results reflect delusions of grandeur on the part of judges. We are so impressed with ourselves and our importance that we are always right in our estimations, and others, well, others are mostly mistaken. Maybe, but maybe not, as I do find it hard to swallow that 80-100% of these member judges, over the course of 28 years, are uniformly pretentious. Instead, I think we need to explore the profoundness of these results and how they affect judging today. I believe they divulge the truth and real power of subjectivity, as opposed to objectivity in the dog show game. In the face of this power, how can the AKC proceed obtusely and obliviously restructuring, regarding the judges approval process all the while disregarding these phenomena?

There is also supplemental data, which lays bare disturbing realities that judges face on a regular basis. That is to say it is no longer uncommon to learn about judges having their award placements questioned, even challenged by AKC Field Representatives. Aware of this disturbing trend the SCJA, in 1996, began polling its many members and in doing so, exposed the irreconcilability between truth and policy. Virtually all judges agree that all, not just themselves but also AKC Field Representatives, bear differing opinions regarding quality. Nevertheless, the AKC continues using Field Representative evaluations as a primary source for deciding whether or not a judge advances in additional breeds. Even today, the 2013 Judges Task Force proposes a Canine College that is based on a judge's awards and selection which will be a tool for determining the worthiness of the judging applicant and their advancement. Looking back at the previous survey percentages, if as much as 99% of judges believe that breeder-judges will not grade their own breeds in a like manner, how can we use their ratings as a critical component in the virtual Canine College, or use it to determine a vague consensus?

Indeed, debating a judge's selections has escalated over the decades. In 1996, responding to the question if a judge felt intimidated by a Field Representative at any time in their career as a judge, 52% replied affirmatively. This number was noteworthy be-

cause membership at that time was composed of a large number of senior judges. In 1997, 39% replied that their placements were questioned by an AKC Field Rep after judging of a breed. In 1999, this number rose to 48%. Fast forward to most recent polling, in 2007, 53% of judges replied "Yes."

What is equally disturbing is the hypocrisy of AKC management's actions during the years the confrontational incidents were increasing. AKC provided written assurances decrying this very practice insisting that Field Representatives were not questioning Judges decisions. In February 1997, Mr. Sprung who was then Vice President of Dog Events wrote, "At no time, however, does a Field Representative 'challenge' the judge's decision." This proves there is a great chasm between policy and reality; yet, even more contradictory is this statement by a former AKC Director of Judging Operations. In a letter he wrote, "It is the responsibility of judges to interpret the rules and breed standards and apply them accordingly; therefore, how a judge conducts the ring and the specimens they select are at their sole discretion. ... Further, a judge's decision is precisely what an owner seeks when he or she enters a dog in a show. Just as it is practically impossible for anyone to be completely objective about their own dog, it is equally certain that no two judges are going to see the same dog, even at the same moment, in exactly the same way. The whole point of a dog show is for exhibitors to put the question of relative merit up to one particular person at one particular time."

Here we are today with relative merit disputed by AKC Field Representatives at some time in the judging career of at least 50% of the judges in the aforesaid latest survey results. According to even more recent

verbal chronicles, this number may be underrated. The takeaway is that Field Representatives are increasingly shouldered with more and more responsibilities at the increasing number of shows they must cover. Once upon a time they were considered liaisons to the show giving club and exhibitors, advising on the rules and regulations applying to dog shows. Now, the duties for determining a judge's worthiness and fate is also carried out by these few Representatives. Representatives who are both 'judge and jury,' due in large part to the AKC Board of Directors having absolved themselves of their obligations set forth in the Charter & Bylaws and Rules Applying to Dog Shows. The board's duty to approve or disapprove judges has been relinquished to subordinates, and in large part, for AKC judges, a Field Representative could be likened to a deity.

Back to the judge's association sampling results. The lesson to be learned from the data is elementary. Best summed up by a distinguished member of the AKC judging community, since 1961, Mr. Wallace Pedé who plainly states, "One cannot test another's opinion with an opinion of their own." The question asked by Mr. Pedé is, "Why does the AKC expend hundreds of thousands of dollars employing a group of individuals to criticize, critique the judges and replace the judge's opinion with their own? It is about time we let the judges judge the dogs...a good many believe the judging approval process is worse than ever."

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