

# DO THE HOKEY POKEY

## TAKE ONE STEP FORWARD AND TWO STEPS BACK

by Lisa Dubé Forman

**T**here are many interesting, perhaps exciting, new competition titles and awards to achieve and this past 2011 proved to have no shortage in this department. The AKC introduced an enhancement to the Grand Champion competition. Judges already award Select Dog and Select Bitch at AKC all-breed, group and specialty shows, and now Grand Champions can earn Bronze, Silver, Gold and Platinum designations. The judge is not responsible for selecting these levels, rather the dogs earn them on a point schedule. Ostensibly, these achievement levels give exhibitors an opportunity for continued recognition and achievement; and there is a new Top 100 All-Breed Grand Champions list to accompany this title. The AKC also announced the online GCH Breed Lists have been expanded from the top 25 to 100 dogs.

We also now have a newly sanctioned Four-to-Six Month (Beginner Puppy) Competition with the new Certificate of Merit Title (CM). This class competition will be held separately from the main regular judging and is subject to clubs participation. Both the CM title and the new age class will also be offered at the newly sanctioned Open Show which AKC has launched. The Open Show is an informal American Kennel Club-sanctioned conformation event at which Championship points are not earned but rather Certificate of Merit points are awarded to this introductory AKC conformation suffix title. The Open Shows are events at which dog clubs, judges, stewards, and exhibitors and their dogs gain experience needed for licensed events. That is, of course, if the show clubs have the energy, time and workforce to hold such an event together with or as a replacement to their Sanctioned Match Shows. Notably, Professional Handlers are not permitted to exhibit in Open Shows nor in the Four-to-Six Month Puppy event. The AKC defines a professional as any person who belongs or has belonged to a professional handlers' organization, distributed rate cards, or otherwise advertised or represented themselves as handling dogs for pay.

In October 2011, the American Kennel Club announced their newest creation. The AKC believes that most dogs are shown by their owners and in this spirit they want to recognize the dedication and enthusiasm of these exhibitors. Drum roll please... We now have a new AKC Owner/Handler Series, a non-titling competition, which will showcase owner/handled dogs across the country. The gist of the AKC Owner/Handler competition is as follows. It will be conducted following Best of Breed judging in each breed ring. All dogs in the BOB competition (including WD & WB) will stay in the ring after the judge makes their placements in BOB competition. The ring steward will ask all professional handlers to leave the ring and then the judge will then select the Best Owner/Handled (BOH) exhibit. The dog and its owner will continue to accrue points for any owner/handled group placements or Bests In Show.

The AKC website states the 2012 AKC Owner/Handler Series will visit selected dog shows and it will not be offered at every all-breed competition, thus far. The top-ranked dogs from the Owner/Handler Series will be posted on the AKC website and the top 10 owner-handled dogs of each breed and variety will be invited to compete at an "end of year" competition show. Rankings of the dogs competing in the series will be compiled based on the Best of Breed, Group and Best in Show placements in this specific series competition. Dogs owned or exhibited by professional handlers are not eligible for this competition.

Despite this handy explanation, I am not convinced it will be as easy

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as described after reading the procedural guide below that judges and stewards must follow in published order. Truthfully, I find this guide and the process quite amusing. What immediately came to mind was the old song and dance, "Do the Hokey Pokey."

## JUDGE AND RING STEWARD PROCEDURAL GUIDE

The Owner/Handler competition is conducted following Best of Breed judging in each breed ring. Dogs handled by professional handlers are not eligible to compete. Eligible dogs that are entered in BOB competition are identified by an asterisk (\*) in the stewards book and the catalog. (Discounting the possibility that a Handler will pick up a client or dog ringside.)

1. All dogs in the BOB competition (including WD & WB) are to stay in the ring after the judge makes their placements in BOB competition.
2. The ring steward asks all professional handlers to leave the ring.
3. The ring steward confirms the dogs remaining in the ring are eligible using the steward's book or catalog markings.
4. The judge is to then select the Best Owner/Handler (BOH).
  - a) If the BOB is eligible they are automatically BOH.
  - b) If BOB is ineligible and BOS is eligible, excuse all dogs of the same sex as BOS and choose BOH from the remaining dogs.
  - c) If both BOB & BOS are ineligible and Select Dog & Select Bitch are both eligible, the judge is to choose BOH from the Selects and eligible WD or WB.
  - d) If one of the Selects is eligible excuse all dogs of the same sex and the judge chooses BOH from the remaining dogs of the opposite sex including the eligible WD or WB.
  - e) If BOB, BOS, SD and SB are not eligible the judge may choose any eligible dog remaining in the ring including WD & WB as BOH.

It would be a challenging task to make this stuff up but here it is anyway. You put your right foot in, you put your right foot out, you put your right foot in and shake it all about. You do the hokey pokey and you turn yourself around, that's what it's all about. I guess my cynicism springs from the basic question, what is next? Either your dog wins Best of Breed or points from the classes or not. Do we exhibitors really need yet another condolence prize after we do not win BOB? Currently, we have Award of Merits, which are non-titled but are offered at all-breed and specialty shows, we have Select competitions, and now we are to focus on whatever is left in the ring to award Best Owner/Handler (BOH)! Therefore, if you do not win BOB, BOW, BOS, Select Dog, Select Bitch, or an Award of Merit (if applicable) then you can still win the consolation prize of BOH. In some circles, veteran exhibitors and breeders already regard the Award of Merit as a "crybaby" prize. Ergo, I would imagine this new BOH will be referred to similarly. This procedural guide is ripe for a snafu never mind cumbersome and clumsy. We all know that ring stewards are very much appreciated for their hard work however, experienced ring stewards are in short supply and highly prized. One can only imagine how this Judge and Steward procedural guide will work with an inexperienced steward. Yes, there is always the possibility that no hitches may occur however, I would

not bet on that.

We have lost our perspective and need to get back to the basics. I believe that the backbone of the sport, the longtime breeder exhibitors are interested in fair, honest and knowledgeable decision-making in our competitions that are free from partiality, free from favoritism. We do not desire more condolence awards and we do not need everyone left standing in the ring to receive a prize for coming which is so reminiscent of our children's Little League baseball or soccer events. All the kids get a trophy so they can all feel good about themselves. I understand that the income from the Grand Champion titles allegedly has been influential on the balance sheet and there may or may not be an uptick on entries because of the new BOH. Sadly, some Owner/Handlers may see this as their only way to get legitimate, widespread recognition with a very good dog in intense breed competition against heavily campaigned and nationally advertised dogs handled by Professionals. Accordingly, here lies the paradox.

On or about 2007, the AKC contrived and then implemented the Amateur Owner/Handler Class (AOH) in conformation competition. Professional Handlers are ineligible to enter this class. Therefore, we do not have to assume but reference AKC statements that the class was conceived to provide the exhibiting public the opportunity to compete in a class without professional handlers so they may advance to Winners competition. I do not believe this class has proven to be a notable success and apparently neither had the AKC from its April 2010 minutes in which the AKC previously tasked staff in an attempt to gauge the effectiveness of this class. The reality is that AOH competes in the Winners class for points towards a championship title and it is likely they compete against a professional(s). Seemingly, in many people's minds the AOH class is delaying the inevitable. The AKC has since attempted to increase the relevance and usage of the class by explaining the class to judges in order to avoid the class from being trivialized. Moreover and applicable to the subject at hand, the AKC already considered an Amateur-Owner Ranking System. What I do not understand is let's just get to the crux of it. Obviously the AKC realizes that Owner/Handlers feel, accurately or not, that there is an injustice occurring in all-breed judging with favoritism towards the Professional Handlers. If we are now to celebrate the backbone of our sport being the Owner/Handlers then why not consider having two types of shows from now on? This may or may not be a novel concept and certainly is worth exploring.

Subdivide conformation shows offering Owner/Handler all-breed shows with championship title points and Professional Handler all-breed shows with championship title points to exhibit their client's dogs. Look, let's face it, professional handlers exhibit considerable entries and/or strings of dogs and this translates to income for clubs. Professional handlers attend show after show, weekend after weekend and their presence and participation are influential, to some or maybe most, but certainly not all. The statement could be made that there is a collection of Judges who adjudicate on a regular basis, or judges who seek to keep their entries up thereby validating their fees and expenses who are partial to the dogs shown by Professional Handlers. It is not uncommon that if a Professional Handler loses under a judge they may not enter under that judge again, despite the sound, quality judging that took place. I know this for a fact and, I shall add, so do countless other judges and competitors. Instead of skirting the issue by creating Amateur Owner/Handler classes, Open Shows,

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Four to Six Month puppy events, Amateur Owner/Handler rankings and now Best Owner/Handler and its own ranking system--all of which exclude Professional Handlers participation -- we create two different conformation shows in which points and titles are awarded for both sets of competitors. In doing so, it effectively minimizes the appearance of questionable judging ethics which obviously is a prevalent concern amongst Owner/Handler exhibitors, a concern that AKC acknowledges. This also eliminates the need for an awkward Best Owner/Handler prize at our conformation shows. I am sorry but how many condolence awards can we hand out? I'd wager that if there were two separate competitions we would see a whole new variation on the seesaw because if the AKC figures are to be believed, then eighty percent of exhibitors may flock to the Owner/Handler shows for their AKC championship titles.

Many veteran fanciers wish to see refocus hence, emphasis placed back on Breed competition. Yes, Grand Champion titles has helped slightly. However, this title and its enhancements pale in comparison to today's center of attraction, the group competition which is glorified and idolized. Group competition is also big money. Articles have been written about the costs, time and effort involved in which to become successful at Group level and Best in Show competition. It is an exorbitant process.

The benefits of two similar but separate championship shows would be numerous. Along with the "feel good" emotional aspect of an Owner/Handler-only conformation competition, I wager we would see a rejuvenation and sizable increase in entries at separate Owner/Handler shows. Why? Because veteran breeders and newcomers would flock to competitions where they perceive a level playing field without having to compete against a Professional Handler and their clients who have blanketed the country with advertising and whose exhibits are shown with such frequency they are known by sight and call name. If the owners of these Top Ten exhibits wish to show at the owner/handler competitions then they are welcomed to do so sans any professional handling. The dog must win on its own merit and it may be that some Top Ten dogs would continue to win without the dramatic baiting, the exaggerated stacking, and the flying trots at Mach 2 around the ring (breed appropriate or not). The focus is rightfully redirected back to Best of Breed competition and the Group judging would be a delight to behold. I cannot tell you how many times I have observed wonderful but rarely shown dogs win their breed and not even receive a perfunctory glance in group competition. Frequently what happens is that handlers win the group placements and those lovely yet unknown dogs walk out unrecognized. It does not surprise me, nor many others, that Owner/Handlers and breeders may perceive they are spending their hard-earned money, weekend after weekend, to lose in a what many feel are predetermined group competitions.

An emotive benefit I would expect to see at Owner/Handler conformation shows is increased attendance from Breed judging through Groups to Best in Show. We all have read and/or heard veteran dog show fanciers nostalgically recall how, in the good old days, it was common and almost expected that exhibitors would stay through from Breed judging to Best in Show or at least Group judging. There was a benefit and purpose from such socializing as people would educate and be educated while debating structure, form, function, muscle physiology, and breed history. No longer the case, many veterans would ascribe "the state of unknowing of all things dog" to the lack of this thorough,

valuable experience. I appreciate times have changed and people live divergent, busier lives. However, I suspect motivation--or specifically the lack of--plays a substantial role why Owner/Handlers depart soon after conclusion of breed judging. Owner/Handlers who lose to a heavily campaigned Top Ten dog or a professionally handled dog are lacking the enthusiasm and interest to hang out and support their breed. Some may question why they should remain to watch the Professional Handlers win or place in group. Owner/Handlers have limited interest as sometimes the owners of campaigned or professionally handled dogs do not attend the shows so there no longer is a camaraderie amongst the competitor breeders and owners. Further, some of the Professional Handlers do not socialize nor are they excessively friendly with Owner/Handlers so, again, motivation is at a minimal to stay on at the show. Who's to say what may happen in the future, however, the steps taken thus far by AKC indicate an acknowledgment of the predicament. We just keep dancing around the edges and I do not believe that doling out commiseration prizes are the answer.

Life, in general, has many challenges. It serves up a surfeit of frustrating episodes that we must accept but often there are especially disheartening times when demands expected of us are counterintuitive. Such is the case with all too familiar, exasperating and deflating announcement.

*For those judges planning to apply for additional breeds in the future, the Evaluations and Observations received from the Field Staff comprise 45% of the decision made by the Staff Committee on the breeds in which you have applied. Without at least three current evaluations the Staff Committee may not approve your application for additional breeds. If the Staff Committee turns down an applicant you are then prohibited from reapplying for one year from the date denied. The evaluations that were used to grant your regular status may be used on your next application providing that application is within the next three (3) years. If you have not been provisional for breeds within the three years prior to your application or if you have not had any Judging Evaluations from the AKC Executive Field staff in the same period, you are advised to request the Field Staff at any upcoming events to observe you in a breed with a sufficient entry in order to have current Evaluations on file. The absence of recent Evaluations or Observations could result in the delay of the processing or the decline of your application by the Staff Committee.* {My emphasis underlines}

So goes the newest announcement in the AKC Judges Newsletter "The Standard," Fall Issue 2011. These newsletters are a trove of information, a minefield for adverse decrees. After seeing this "Reminder" in the judges newsletter, I began research. I researched and researched yet I found nothing written that would indicate when this policy was implemented, nor when the judges community was previously informed of such a multi-tiered policy. When I questioned a well-informed, long serving source, they thought they may have heard in passing of one element of the policy, however, they expressed surprise as to the other elements. After my pressing, they could not pinpoint when they may have heard about such one or more elements of the policy and they did not see it in writing. In conclusion, it appears that some AKC policies can be made orally and there is apparently no need to have them written because if they are heralded from the mountaintop this suffices as a written commandment without the pesky need for writing them down. I find this all very

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unsettling and oppressive. The AKC has announced a policy imputing a penalty for submitting an application for additional breeds without *at least* three current evaluations and, ah ha!, there is the addition of an operative word, *current*. This throws another monkey wrench into the cogwheel.

I reviewed the conformation application paperwork available on the AKC website to include: New Breed Judge Application and Procedures, Additional Breed Application and Procedures, How to Score Your Additional Breed Application, Additional Breed Component Criteria, Request for Regular Status and the entire Judging Approval Process revised January 2007 for New Breeds and Additional Breeds. I have been unable to find any written policy in the published documents and required paperwork that states if the Staff Committee turns down an applicant for the absence of three evaluations, the applicant is then prohibited from reapplying for one year from the date denied. Similarly, the phrase or requirement *current* is also not found in any of the documents I have researched nor is there any written revelation that Evaluations and Observations comprise 45% of the Staff decision.

There is an inescapable paradox with the AKC quietly revealing Evaluations and Observations comprise 45% of the Staff decision to approve or deny an applicant while simultaneously, the AKC decreased attendance of its Executive Field Staff at shows. For the regular reader you are familiar with my previous articles and my sound arguments challenging the practicality of evaluation requirements. At the risk of sounding redundant, I challenge these issues for several reasons and my position remains unchanged. It is unwarranted to impose a requirement for advancement in breed judging approval when the American Kennel Club does not have the personnel to administer to the requirement. I provided the example of even a Group Judge who had judged their provisional breeds five times, yet were unable to obtain any Executive Field Staff evaluations. I am unyielding in my opposition because not only is this unfeasible and illogical, it is extravagant. Countless quality, highly motivated judges are incapable of financing such nonsensical and indulgent activities to achieve regular status in their approved breeds. Consequently, exhibitors will be the ones to suffer as potentially fresh new talent will be extinguished from the judging pool.

According to the next analogous sentence in the AKC decree, evaluations that were used to grant us regular status may be used on our next application providing that application is within the next three (3) years. If we have not been provisional for breeds within the three years prior to our application or if we have not had any Judging Evaluations from the AKC Executive Field staff in the same time frame, AKC advises us to request the Field Staff at any upcoming events to observe us in a breed with a sufficient entry in order to have current Evaluations on file. If we do not have recent Evaluations or Observations this may result in the delay of the processing or the decline of our application.

There is an inevitable sense of irony resulting from this bulletin as many times we cannot find an AKC Field Representative at the shows to compile the necessary and newly defined, current observations. Furthermore, you better hope that your approval is delayed and not denied because, if so, the penalty for being a presumptuous judge is the prohibition from reapplying for one full year. However, what springs to mind is the most elementary question. What the heck does this statement really mean? This bulletin, and the significance of the wording *three years current* is

confounding and is easily misconstrued.

Are we to understand now that our previous AKC Field Rep observations used to grant us regular status in a different breed will now be used to fulfill the required observations in a new additional breed as long the application for such new breed is within three years of obtaining regular status on the previous breed? If so, then why does all paperwork indicate that we are required to have three observations from three different field Representatives and further, why the notification of a penalty then for submitting an application without three evaluations? Conversely, does this statement mean that the observations obtained while in breed provisional status must not be older than three years or the judge has to start anew acquiring *current* observations to complete the requirements for regular status application in that breed? If so, this places even more of an unacceptable burden on judges.

It is established that completing provisional assignments can take years. Although the new Judging Approval Policy, as approved at the November 2011 AKC Board meeting, takes effect March 2012 the proviso of having *current* evaluations may still be adverse. If a Judge completes only one assignment per year in their provisional breed--remember that 43% of the Judges are approved for only one or two breeds so this is entirely feasible due to their lack of marketability--it shall take them a minimum of three years to complete their permit assignments. If the latter interpretation of the AKC announcement is correct then this manifesto requiring evaluations to be current within three years may require a provisional judge to have an observation *every* assignment. Due to the increase in competition amongst judges to acquire assignments despite now only having three required permit assignments, these new judges with one or two breeds may not obtain an assignment annually or, if so, they may still arrive at a distant show to discover there is no AKC Field Representative in attendance. No observation is available therefore the distinction, *current*, will be highly influential in this judges career as older evaluations may be considered outdated and unusable. This appears not be applicable in Low Entry breeds, however.

It is comforting that many readers understand and sympathize with the frustration accompanying provisional judges on our journey to pursue and advance in our shared passion and sport. With all due respect to those serving on the AKC Board of Directors including the AKC President who wear two hats, I suspect there were contradistinctive AKC Judging requirements when they were initially approved and advancing in their careers. Today's demands as well as the timeframes for the average Judge with few breeds are vastly different. Such journeys today involve disproportionate expenditures and vast expanses of time which further discourages or prevents many talented individuals from advancing in their judging careers. Indeed, we know many who simply become disillusioned, who forgo or limit their participation within our sport. Those of us on the front lines know from experience that once great talent is lost, it is difficult at best to get them back into the fold.

At some point as we prepared for, journeyed forth or endeavored in our judging careers, we were repeatedly warned by countless number of seasoned participants of the pitfalls and quagmires that awaited us. Sadly, many proved all too true. I and many others can only hope that this most recent announcement will be reconsidered and reversed in the very near future.