

EXCLUSIVE — NOT — INCLUSIVE

by Lisa Dubé Forman

Photo by Lisa Croft Elliott

I am a participant in the very worthy AKC Mentor program. I make myself available to any new exhibitor or anyone considering joining us in our favorite pastime. Listening and obtaining feedback is critical and is one of the most successful strategies that businesses, corporations, and individuals can employ for success. Our sport is not immune rather the sports cumulative success is predicated on the opinions of the participants and members. On that note, the sport of competitive purebred dog events and competing in them has recently been described to me by newcomers as intimidating, unfriendly. These are but two adjectives that have been used to describe their initial feelings.

As I have listened to my assigned new exhibitor and mentee I have heard valuable, but for me not surprising, feedback from them as to their immediate impressions after attending several all-breed dog shows. Firstly, I encouraged them to attend shows, visit with other fanciers in their breed and even to assist the show giving club as a volunteer so that they may familiarize themselves with a show's function, its responsibilities, schedules and routines. Afterwards I requested feedback. The

mentee expressed sentiments about the sport being intimidating, some people were rude and importantly that the sport was exclusionary which she describes further on.

My mentee went on to recount an incident that involved her during an indoor all-breed show to which she brought along her AKC registered puppy—this puppy had already begun attending handling classes and was being readied for a potential show career. I will digress to say that in spite of my repeated attempts to encourage the mentee to show the pup themselves they were apprehensive about doing so and were contemplating hiring a handler. As the mentee and pup were sauntering around the puppy had a bowel movement.

So there the mentee stood, indoors, waiting while the puppy had a bowel movement--simultaneously looking around sheepishly as they did not have a baggie to collect the stool. They described in an incredulous tone that people walked by without offering assistance. Notably, the mentee recounted she received disapproving and annoyed looks. The mentee was especially bewildered because earlier in the day she had observed other people who found themselves in a similar situa-

Continued on page 214

EXCLUSIVE NOT INCLUSIVE

Continued from page 212

tion with no bags in hand and she readily and willingly assisted them.

Other interesting feedback came after another day of judging. The mentee was observing the judging of their new breed and they innocently reported back, "The judge was kind of grumpy and nearly lost his cool when one dog pooped in the ring." In my opinion, the very fact that the mentee commented or picked up on a judge's body language and read annoyance on the face of this judge tells me that I probably have a significantly less chance now than ever before of convincing this new exhibitor to begin showing the dog themselves rather than hiring a handler to show their puppy.

What do incidents like these tell us? Perhaps many newcomers are intimidated by aloof attitudes, by scowls on judge's faces, by disapproving looks and the lack of civility and graciousness on the part of fellow exhibitors when noticing another exhibitor requiring assistance. From the feedback I have received, I feel it is safe to say that newcomers do not always feel welcomed. I am not placing this responsibility on AKC as certainly it cannot legislate the friendliness of exhibitors but it bears repeating from my earlier article (January 2010 Westminster Issue-- *The Dog Show Game, Telling it Like it is*) that I believe the sport on the whole is experiencing a motivational crisis. On this AKC can and must effect changes.

But recently even more feedback from my mentee has been received and it is very disappointing. My newbie who acquired a pup that is a popular breed reported, "The big summer activity was 2 days in ____ at the ____ Circuit. I wish I could tell you that it was a wonderful experience. And certainly there were wonderful moments. But I'd be lying if I told you either one of us enjoyed the hours we spent at the show... it was a large field of dogs (35 - 45 dogs on both days!) and 90% of them professionally handled... I have at this point spoken with maybe a dozen people who both breed and show their ____ and they all say the same thing. In order to finish them, you need a pro. I met just one person who does it with her family and they do it as a hobby, as a way to spend time together as a family. They've been showing their dogs for years and have yet to finish one. I don't have the support network, and the preparation and trip were a lot of work and exhausting. You might be able to earn a point here or there at small shows. But majors? Or circuits? It's the ____ and the ____ et al who

are getting major points at the vast majority of shows. The AKC may wish it was otherwise and might wish to encourage newbies to be diligent in order to make it so, but that doesn't change the current reality."

Do I believe that my mentee speaks for all newcomers to our sport? No, I do not. I believe there are newcomers who after being introduced to our sport have been "bitten by the show bug" and continue. However, how many newcomers' experiences are similar to hers and these direct observations from an outsider looking in should be a wake-up call for the AKC. These days how many newcomers have discretionary funds to purchase a show quality companion, fund and participate in training classes, pay entry fees which continue to rise, bear all the necessary costs associated with traveling to the shows such as gasoline and hotel rooms and are now advised they will need to hire a professional handler at \$__ fees. I would not want to be present when the "newbie" shares the costs with their spouses who are, shall we say, less than enthusiastic about joining our sport. Those of us in the trenches cannot claim naïveté. Our sport and the AKC are losing financial revenue and participation and the above forthright, outsider assessment is one of the reasons why.

I began writing this article prior to receiving the recent AKC Gazette August 2010 issue and in it was an article titled, "Welcome to the Sport of Dogs!" I agree with the author Barbara Wicklund who writes "That's the message seasoned exhibitors, judges and stewards need to convey to newcomers to AKC companion events." I will not digress but will ask readers to reread the article I mentioned above wherein I related numerous personal experiences and observations that, if I were not a "seasoned" exhibitor, would have driven me out of this sport entirely. Although I am active in our sport I certainly have found myself on many occasions as a breeder/exhibitor so disheartened that I took a hiatus; I lacked any interest or excitement to enter an all-breed show even though I had several lovely examples of my breed to show.

In a recent AKC Exhibitor Mentor survey I suggested that very large and noticeable banners be utilized to attract and welcome new exhibitors or spectators to our sport. I also suggested welcoming announcements for both new exhibitors and spectators be repeatedly broadcasted via the PA systems because new spectators usually do not have judging programs while they are

Continued on page 216

EXCLUSIVE NOT INCLUSIVE

Continued from page 214

wandering around the shows looking at all the pretty dogs. We all see these people who are simply observing—they attend because they thought it might be fun to watch in the same way many of us might attend a horse race, horse show jumping, dressage, or even driving events. Many of us do not own a horse that we could enter in these events but we attend anyway because we have a shared interest or love of the animal and because we thought it would be enjoyable. What scares me is the predictable reception that spectators and newcomers can receive while meandering around and are innocently asking questions of the people who make up our shows today. Are you a betting person? Who wants to put money on the scenario that their questions will result in annoyed looks or downright rudeness. Can you imagine the reception they would receive if they unsuspectingly approached some professional handlers and assistants with general questions?

I am aware of the new exhibitor briefing programs that are offered at many all-breed shows which also welcome spectators. My recommendation is to take this to the next level. I suggest that we have a booth or check-in area located in a highly visible area designated by a large, colorful banner which allows a mentor who is a member of the AKC Mentor program to sign-in denoting their availability on that day. The purpose is to make available AKC Mentors like myself who are willing to be accessible at an all-breed show to assist new exhibitors from any breed. Upon signing or checking-in the mentor can indicate which ring(s) they will be located at during the day so that a new person can locate them. If a Mentor knows they will be too busy or require an early leave from that day's show they do not have to sign up at the check-in desk but hopefully they will do so at the next event they attend. Our AKC Mentor program is already set up to have assigned mentors available for new exhibitors of any breed in large geographic locations via email or telephone. Unfortunately original feedback from my mentee indicated that a previous mentor(s) she was assigned never returned her calls or emails. So why did this mentor participant even bother to volunteer? With the availability of AKC Mentors at all-breed shows, I hope we can roll back the exclusiveness and sometimes arrogant atmosphere that is

prevailing in the dog show game and make it an inclusionary sport.

We as Mentors can offer assistance to newcomers at the all-breed level. Simple kind words of support and praise can go a long way. It is irrelevant that a newcomer is in a different breed. Any seasoned exhibitor can provide valuable guidance and knowledge about basic aspects of the dog show game such as where to set up grooming tables, ring schedules, when to arrive at the designated rings, picking up armbands and the odd and even numbers, what arm to display them on (it is a different arm in obedience), how the competition structure works for class winners, who continues on to compete for Winners, Reserve Winners, then onto Best of Winners, Best of Breed, Best of Opposite Sex, Select Dog and Bitch and also how to calculate points. On an amusing note, I know many "seasoned" exhibitors who still to this day cannot calculate points correctly and now especially are thrown into a tizzy with the new Grand Championship points program.

Imagine yourself as a newbie and realize that learning all these basics in the beginning can be very daunting. Now combine this with having an aloof, rude judge who is impatient and barks out directions or worse yet wordlessly flicks their hand in a general direction. Then your dog has a bowel movement in the ring in spite of the fact that you just spent an hour walking the dog pleading with them to relieve themselves. As a newbie you are already nervous and now it is not a pleasant experience anymore as the judge nearly loses their cool while glancing at their watch-- your delay is now their delay as they were already behind schedule. This is what you paid \$32.00 to experience in all of 1 to 2 minutes -- never mind all the other associated costs to attend? As a newbie joining a new sport and attending the show alone with no friendly face to look for or an experienced mentor to provide support how long do you believe you would last?

Now do you understand that we as a whole require reevaluation? We must remove the elitism and become an inclusionary sport otherwise we will run out of newbies to carry on in our footsteps.