


WHAT'S THE MATTER WITH YOU PEOPLE? HAVE YOU ALL **GONE MAD?**

by Lisa Dubé Forman



I cannot believe what I am reading. Sometimes I feel that I fell down the proverbial rabbit hole. I am referring to the controversy surrounding random coat testing of show dogs in England by The Kennel Club.

I read an article by Simon Parsons of Dog World England and, admittedly, I was in disbelief (although nothing should surprise me anymore) about the issue he was reporting. Parsons writes there is a prominent breeder in England, famous in several coated breeds, who has set forth a motion to The Kennel Club, that “testing for powder, lacquer and silicone-based grooming products should be stopped.” Parsons explains, the prominent breeder is not requesting an end to testing for dyes, only an end to test for hairspray, cleaning products and other grooming products. Mr. Parsons also states that an e-petition has been circulating and signed by many of Britain's most consistently successful exhibitors regarding this motion.

The judicious rules are clearly stated in The Kennel Club regulations and now some exhibitors in England want to change them. First, let me bring you up to speed with The Kennel Club (England) regulations:

A) No substance which alters the natural colour, texture or body of the coat may be present in the dog's coat for any purpose at any time during the Show. No substance which alters the natural colour of any external part of the dog may be present on the dog for any purpose at any time during the Show.

B) Any other substance (other than water) which may be used in the preparation of a dog for exhibition must not be allowed to remain in the coat or on any other part of the dog at the time of exhibition.

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The Kennel Club regulations further states: "The General Committee without previous notice may order an examination of any dog or dogs at any Show. Any examination thus ordered will be made by a person having executive authority who shall have a written directive from the Kennel Club in their possession. Samples may be taken for further examination and analysis."

As a refresher our American Kennel Club regulations state on this subject the following:

"No dog shall be eligible to compete at any show and no dog shall receive any award at any show in the event the natural color or shade of natural color or the natural markings of the dog have been altered or changed by the use of any substance whether such substance may have been used for cleaning purposes or for any other reason. Such cleaning substances are to be removed before the dog enters the ring. "If in the judge's opinion any substance has been used to alter or change the natural color or shade of natural color or natural markings of a dog, then in such event the judge shall withhold any and all awards from such dog, and the judge shall make a note in the judge's book giving his reason for withholding such award. The handler or the owner, or both, of any dog or dogs from which any award has been withheld for violation of this section of the rules, or any judge who shall fail to perform his duties under this section, shall be subject to disciplinary action."

After deliberation, The Kennel Club in England posted on their website the following: "A proposal to ban coat testing for powder, lacquer and silicone-based products at dog shows was declined at the Kennel Club's Annual General Meeting this morning, but an amendment was accepted that will see the policy put back on the table for further discussion...We will discuss these issues with interested parties to try and {sic} find a solution to concerns, whilst continuing to ensure that dog shows reward healthy dogs without exaggeration or undue modification."

Why is it being reconsidered? Everyone, let's get back to basics. Is it necessary to reiterate that conformation dog shows are intended to evaluate breeding stock? For instance, the AKC plainly states, "The dog's conformation (overall appearance and structure) an indication of the dog's ability to produce quality puppies, is judged." Some people believe that changes across the pond may take hold over here. In my opinion, the preparation to exhibit dogs in far too many breeds has become twisted. Twisted in the truest definition being: unhealthily abnormal; warped, forced out of its natural shape.

Conformation dog show events are not beauty contests. These are not grooming competitions. These are not events determining which groomer has the best scissoring ability, or who is the best stylist. We all have heard the stories about what incredible lengths some exhibitors, handlers, or owners will go to achieve visual perfection in their work sculpting, coloring coats, and modifying the dogs natural coat texture and body. The stories are fantastic. Again, fantastic meaning remote from reality; of extraordinary degree. No, I am not naïve. I know these practices are considered common and I did not just fall off the turnip truck. I am compelled to reiterate the basics as

the AKC specifies, "Judges examine ("go over") each dog with their hands to see if the teeth, muscles, bones and coat texture conform to the breed's standard. They view each dog in profile for overall balance, and watch each dog gait ("move") to see how all of those features fit together in action."

If an exhibitor in England or in this country alters the dog coat with hairspray, powder, lacquer and silicone-based grooming products then they are not only enhancing or modifying coat texture, they are cheating. They are altering dogs coat texture, color or body. The Kennel Club in England has or maybe it will be past tense, had teeth, behind their rules with unannounced testing. Now, because the practice of using powder, lacquer and silicone-based grooming products is so commonplace the exhibitors feel empowered to request a halt of the testing and discovery. This testing and discovery ensures a level playing field for exhibitors and is not only logical, I assume it is based on the governing or primary purpose for dog shows. Why do show dogs need hair spray and chalk?

As an attendee at Judges Seminars and Specialty Educational Programs I have been surprised on several occasions in my experiences with both long haired and smooth coated dogs. I am a Hound person so the experiences I am recounting are limited within this group. Speaking candidly, I am confident these issues are widespread in the other breed groups with their long coated and harsh, wire-coated breeds. While attending a Whippet specialty judges education program, I brushed up past a few of these smooth coated dogs who were preparing to enter the ring and when I sat down I had chalk covering my brown slacks. On another occasion while attending a program, I examined a Borzoi and my hands became sticky requiring a visit to the restroom to wash up. Over my years on many occasions I have walked around and noticed handlers or exhibitors adding colored chalk to various Terrier coats in the ringside grooming area before they were removed from their tables and brought into the ring. I am mindful of more than a few incidents but I know readers can recall unlimited occasions they have witnessed the same.

Have you ever stopped and watched the endless blow drying of breeds up on tables, even as large as the Newfoundland? I am taking a risk here that I may sound snide and I proclaim that I am not singling out these breeds, but I have to ask these questions. How frequently do native fishermen in Newfoundland shampoo and blow-dry with big brushes the dogs before the animal accompanies them on a days work or after the dog swims in icy waters? What of the Siberian Huskies that work pulling sleds who live tethered outside year-round? These dogs are certainly not bathed and fluffed. On this note I did know a breeder in North America who was successful showing their Siberians and they pulled sleds as well. These dogs were tethered outside to barrels and these breeders did not bathe and blow-dry their Sibes before a show. Yet, from what I have observed, far too many owners and handlers do everything possible to negatively affect their vital breed characteristics by shampooing and blow drying the dogs before going in the ring. I have seen Great Pyrenees, Siberian Huskies, Alaskan Malamutes and even long haired Saint Bernard's on tables being

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blown-dry so the practice is pervasive.

It is understandable why I am “old guard” in this matter, just look at the endless array of products available and you too may become cynical. You can find them all online in show dog supplies and they shamelessly make claims for altering coat texture, color or body. There are chalks and powders that promise to add texture and intensify coat color; special cornstarch and silicone-based powders for intensifying long coats; tear sticks and coat enhancing sprays for covering unsightly stains; finishing sprays for dogs having bad hair days and then aerosol texturizing coat sprays. The more brazen are products such as “Black Out” darkening kit. The description, “This 2-step nose darkening kit for show dogs with discolored noses. Black Out is designed to immediately blacken noses with lack of pigment. Simply apply a small amount of Black Out from each tube to the dog’s nose.” This is verbatim from the advertised product and web page. Now wait a minute, wait a minute. Clearly, this is a product that one uses to alter the pigment on a show dog nose. We all know breed nose color is defined in most breed standards so, let’s go count how many Standards specify the lack of pigmentation on a nose as a fault with penalization ranging in severity from breed to breed.

Another is the “Magic Black” and “Magic White” aerosol that is a color enhancing spray-on chalk that will not rub off like ordinary chalk. Thank goodness for that! How about the “Cover Coat Powder” that the manufacturer describes: “Mix colors for a custom blend or use straight to cover or conceal imperfections in your cats or dogs coat. Just a small amount of Cover Coat Powder will temporarily fill in an uneven coat.” There is a product called “White Ice Cream” which is described as being a “white creme cover-up.” Not to be outdone we have, “Thick-N-Thicker Texturizing Bodifier Aerosols.” The product description states “it immediately builds body, volume and lift! Texture and body to wire coats, fullness to coat furnishings and volume to coats lacking undercoat. No flakiness or build-up. Washes out easily with the first shampoo.” Well, maybe I am being too literal reading the description but it is apparent this product is meant to stay on and in the dog coat. I assume it will not be removed before exhibiting because it clearly states you need to wash it out. So, why would an exhibitor use it if they have to wash it out before the dog goes in the ring? The use of this product is debatable unless there is no intent to wash it out.

The Kennel Club in England rejected the coat testing ban but stated dialogue is set to continue, saying, “Nonetheless, there are concerns that the policy surrounding this issue requires some modification to ensure that everybody is treated in the same way and to protect those who use certain products, such as shampoo, without the intent of altering the natural form of their dog’s coat.” Simon Parsons article reported that random coat tests in England are done usually on the CC and Reserve CC winners in one sex of certain breeds and at this year’s Crufts the male winners in both West Highland White Terriers and

Miniature Poodles were tested. I have no idea why only one sex of a breed is tested nor do I have any knowledge of The Kennel Club process in or how they select an exhibit. I do not believe shampoo should be banned and neither apparently does The Kennel Club. In spite of this though, I will state that shampoo and especially blow drying can and does alter the natural texture of a dogs coat! I have rough-coated Irish Wolfhounds now for 27 years along with a Terrier and I can confidently say any breeder, exhibitor or handler “worth his salt” knows that you do not bathe a harsh coated, rough coated or a water-resistant coated breed before a conformation show because shampoo and blow drying will affect texture of the coat. It softens and glosses the awning, the top layer of hair and guard hairs. In fact, I bathe our hounds a full 7-days prior and often much longer out but not closer to the show date. As for the Terrier, absolutely no bathing of the body coat anywhere near a show date but perhaps the furnishings.

I will supplement my point using the two breeds mentioned by Simon Parsons that were tested at this years Crufts show. I

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am not making any inference towards either specific dog, but simply using their breeds as examples. I must inquire why Westie’s, a straight, hard-coated breed, whose Standard penalizes soft coats and any silkiness is shampooed and/or blow-dry before judging? The coat is so important that their standard even states that, “A hard straight

coat which may have some wheaten tipping is preferable to a white fluffy or soft coat.” Were you aware that a Poodle coat is supposed to be naturally harsh and dense or corded yet they are shampooed and/or blow dried thereby the coat is softened before judging? Some may offer up the excuse that a dirty coat will dull the scissors as the Poodle standard allows for scissoring, “The coat may be shaped in order to insure overall balance” but the operative word is “may.” If a judge overlooks a beautiful representation of the breed because its owner does not have superior or has poor scissoring skills then we have reached new lows. For those like me who do not blindly, uncritically accept or follow these global yet illogical customs, we are only left to ponder. I have to wonder how do these show dogs get so dirty that they require constant bathing and blow drying?

What of the breeder who does not use any of these products and relies on the virtues of their exhibit including type, structural conformation, sound, correct breed gait and heaven forbid, a natural, unbathed coat? This is where many people will claim I am naïve and state those exhibitors no longer show dogs. Moreover, they may claim, and perhaps rightfully so, that these virgin exhibits mostly lose.

Sometimes it feels as if the dog show world is run by the Mad Hatter and I am Alice. I am very much reminded of the hilarious line from Seinfeld in an infamous Diner episode when Elaine shouts, “What’s the matter with you people? Have you all gone mad?”