



HOT BUTTON ISSUE WHEN SHOULD A JUDGE CALL IT QUILTS?

by Lisa Dubé Forman

Most all controversial subjects such as sex, politics or religion give rise to public disagreement. The pressing issue our sport faces is no different, ensuing in what I expect to be a heated debate. The fact that there will come a time when each judge has to call it quits cannot be argued. Instead, many debate the timing of when a judge should call it quits and is foreseen as a difficult situation, in large part, due to a number of our esteemed judges being of an advanced age. It is a cliché to say that the greying of our Judges society is considerable.

We have a pressing but roundly ignored dilemma. At what point should a judge recognize that their performance is suffering and is of questionable value? What happens when judges deny they have experienced setbacks in their judging careers, or others that blind themselves to the likelihood they are undergoing problems.

There are instances where a judge incorrectly marks their judging book to such an extent that placements and awards have to be reconstructed later with exhibitors returning to the Superintendents table to prove their placements with ribbons. Other judges walk around in the ring seemingly absentmindedly pointing to entries for placements, or appear to lose all focus as they attempt to award Best of Winners to a Champion of Record. The latter being somewhat difficult to explain how one loses track of Winners Dog and Winners Bitch in an average, all-breed show ring. One, but not all, of these actions may be attributable to a novice judge in their first judging forays however, these actions most certainly are not emblematic of a seasoned adjudicator.

Exhibitors have had countless dog show experiences where we have walked away from a show ring in bewildering frustration due to judges decisions. Nevertheless, many times these decisions are attributed to simply a difference of opinion, which need to be respected, perhaps not palpable, but they must be respected. Thus, I have vocally supported Judges' having the right of quality of selection, this being a hands-off

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matter. While this is true, I am addressing the serious concern of some senior judges noticeably getting lost in their classes, some ostensibly confused. It is especially dispiriting for seasoned exhibitors to observe our assigned judge adjudicate over other breeds before our ring time, and all we can utter is a worried, "Uh-oh, this does not bode well." Some judges have performed so poorly in their assignments throughout the day that their performance itself becomes a competition outside the ring amongst all the various breed exhibitors as to what breed was affected the most. "I can top that" stories abound regarding the judges behavior, inconsistencies, or flat-out alleged incompetence, especially if it is a two or more day circuit, with exhibitors swapping stories the following day culminating in one or more breeds winning the quiet consensus.

In the past, I have had an AKC Representative and another judge recount a story(s) about a judge(s) in their advanced years getting lost traveling to an assignment. These were not innocent cases of making a wrong turn, arriving late, or jumping on the wrong AirTrain to reach another terminal at the airport. Rather, it was concerning a judge(s) one or more times wandering, aimlessly, through an airport. I conveyed my empathy as this may have been a very frightening experience for an elderly person(s) yet, I wondered out loud how was it these judges were continually offered and were still accepting new assignments. I received a shrug of the shoulders as a reply, at the very least this spared me any policy platitudes. Logically, one would suppose that the show chairperson would make a compassionate and tactful report on such an incident to the AKC. If such behavior was noted in a report, should this judge(s) be permitted to continue accepting assignments? I am obliged to ask if AKC is not notified of any unusual behavior, then explain why were there no reports on such odd behavior?

Typically, these judges may also be having difficulties or display symptoms in their ordinary lives though I was reminded, after discussion with a respected mentor, that judging dogs requires a different set of skills than in our daily life. We both concurred that perhaps these judges do not have a significant 'other' in their daily life or family may be far removed. Worse, those close may be in denial and do not intervene when such Judge behaves abnormally or is having difficulties. While it may be true that judging dogs uses a different set of skills, I find it hard to accept that a Judge who is having mental difficulties safely transporting themselves to and from a dog show assignment—a task requiring physical duties over the course of a long day in which they adjudicate on a large number of dogs in various breeds all with different Standards, interact with innumerable people, perhaps determine a convoluted new award of Best Owner/Handler, judiciously mark their official books—that this Judge will not betray signs of difficulties with execution and quality in their assignments. I do not practice medicine but I do have lengthy experience with a loved one who is suffering from slowly progressive dementia. The first symptoms were sad to accept but when noticed, they require proactive steps, not passiveness.

Pronounced or slight diminishment of mental functions aside, we have observed judges in the show ring that were physically challenged to such a degree they were unable to perform or fulfill their judging assignments in the same capacity as an average judge. They were incapable of walking without assistance and their examination consisted of tapping their hands on the dogs. When dog(s) were gaited the judge only hastily glanced

over at them, a number of us believing the judge most likely could not see the distance despite it being a standardized all-breed ring, much less their judging book which required assistance for accurate marking.

Most memorably, a not long past specialty encounter with a judge left an enduring impression on many dog fanciers. Truly, this is quite a tale. A specialty breed club hired an octogenarian to adjudicate over a two-day, outdoor, breed specialty. This specialty is regularly scheduled in the height of the East Coast summer with temperatures of approximately 90 degrees—on one or more occasions it has been 96-98 degrees with accompanying relative humidity levels of 60 to 79 percent, resulting in a heat index of 100-113 degrees. This is hot, hot for any judge, particularly for an octogenarian. The *pièce de résistance* was the announcement over the sound system just before the specialty began, that this judge is highly allergic to stinging insects. Incredibly, the broadcast continued that if any exhibitor or spectator saw a flying, stinging insect, they were requested to alert the ring stewards or the judge immediately! I am unclear how that would have helped the situation; nonetheless, this was the announcement. Whether the rigors of an outdoor, two-day specialty in high temperatures influenced the judge's demeanor, the very patient exhibitors were subjected to verbal ridicule by this judge, the disparagement bordering on disdainful. Exhibitors were publicly and loudly scolded if they stacked their dogs incorrectly or wrongly set a dog's foot. Accompanying the rebuke were facial gestures with the judge throwing their head back and rolling her eyes. Other times, during examination, if a dog's leg moved and the exhibitor reset it, this would result in the judge stepping back from the dog wildly gesturing with her arms scolding the handler for fidgeting. Exhibitors were chastened if they walked their dog into a show stance with the judge derisively asking, "Is this how you are going to show me your dog?" When gaiting, the judge shouted at exhibitor's to get their dog moving with the irony particularly striking because, despite the breed ring being large and spacious, this judge refused to allow the exhibitors to use the whole ring but to only make small circles in front of her. We discussed why she demanded such small circles—with many believing the judge could not see very far, another thought was the judge did not want the dogs to overexert themselves in the heat. Suffice to say the general agreement was the Judge could only see a limited distance despite having glasses. On the second day of judging her behavior changed, appearing addled with judging patterns varying. The judge topped off the day's folly by making demeaning, uncalled-for comments on how dogs were handled while critiquing class placements into her voice recorder. She commented that an owner handler was 'inept,' another was loud enough to inform a breeder they should use a Handler which was unnecessary as this breeder adequately handles their charges. I was informed that this breeder received a supposed letter of apology from the Judge later on.

I and others are always saddened when an invitation is extended to a judge in such advanced years however, the judge must take responsibility for accepting such an assignment. Her being an octogenarian in such heat and humidity may have resulted in her keen irascibility towards the very patient and stoic exhibitors. Although it may be possible the unforgettable, unforgivable behavior is characteristic of this judge's personality, she and all judges have a responsibility to their exhibitors to fulfill their duties in a meritorious and respectful manner. They need to ensure

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that they are capable of completing an assignment without risk or harm to themselves. An outdoor, multiple day, summer breed specialty is not considered an appropriate venue for a judge who is highly allergic to stinging insects. We can only speculate as to what may have resulted if this Judge were stung, requiring anaphylaxis treatment, if she would have been able to continue. The rigors of a two-day, summer specialty most likely was far more than this elder judge could have imagined nor was capable of properly handling. The crux of this story is that the paying customer, the exhibitors, were the ones who suffered at the hands of this judge. Granted that exhibitors could have opted not to show their dogs after witnessing or having been subjected to such an acerbic temperament but their monies certainly would not have been refunded. Many exhibitors have multiple entries at a specialty show, traveling great distances with costly expenditures of entry fees, hotel accommodations, food, fuel, time off work, pet sitters. Therefore, their continuing to show their dogs is non-negotiable; they grin and bear it.

There are a number of reports from seasoned veterans and even other judges who have witnessed incidences of a few distinguished judges becoming disoriented. One regrettable account was of an esteemed judge, while in the Group Ring, appearing to have lost their bearings. Reportedly, they judged all the dogs, pulled dogs into several groups and then began to judge all the dogs again. I was informed this was not a momentary lapse as the steward was reported to have entered the ring to assist the judge. Recognizing that judges should be treated with respect and dignity still, the significant dilemma remains--when should a judge call it quits? Sadly, there are judges who will not or cannot acknowledge there are any problems. They are not aware of shortcomings in their performance, they are not aware their confusion is evident to others. I am not mistaking the act of deliberating for acts of disorientation. As a younger judge, I have had to momentarily deliberate on the merits of the entries. I am sympathetic and understand a judge can get flustered at any age due to environmental influences, lengthy travel, inexperienced stewards, lack of sleep, food or drink, or because of a long, exhaustive day. This debate recognizes extenuating circumstances exist yet it does not excuse seemingly odd behaviors that are clearly not normal, affecting a legitimate adjudication process.

This is a natural segue to discuss an admirable, dignified approach a select number of judges have taken to prevent or thwart an inevitable downward turn. They call it a Committee of Three. I am told that a select number of judges have typically three of their close peers, trusted advisors, or friends that willingly 'serve' and whose responsibilities are to step in if they observe their friend slowly slipping, making mistakes in easy tasks, questionable placements or awards. This is all in an effort to protect one's own dignity, to avoid unpleasant and embarrassing situations. One such dignified, renowned dog show judge with a Committee

of Three was the late C. Bede Maxwell. Mrs. Maxwell was an Australian sporting group dog fancier and AKC Judge who moved to the West Coast of the United States in the 1960s. Maxie, as she was called by her friends, was instrumental along with several other notable judges in creating effective judges' study groups and organized dog show judge training and education programs. An author, Mrs. Maxwell wrote the book on German Shorthaired Pointers, along with the best-selling, *The Truth About Sporting Dogs* where her research took her to Europe and the United Kingdom. One of these committee members who is actively group judging today and who also boasts a venerable past in show dogs since 1949, shared with me the reasons why this forward thinking judge created the aforementioned Committee.

Mrs. Maxwell had a fear of making embarrassing mistakes, losing command of her memory in her elder years and three close, dearest dog friends were trusted with the duty of protecting their friend's reputation. These peers felt it a privilege to be asked and although their intervention was not required, Mrs. Maxwell resigned her license to judge, to their recollection, before any issue arose and to this day my source felt it an honor to have stood ready by their friend's side. Today, this former member of C. Bede Maxwell's Committee of Three has their own Committee of Peers.

This judge shared with me another touching, remarkable story about one more icon in the dog show world, the late, legendary Mr. Elsworth Howell of Howell Book House publishing fame. Along with

being a famed publisher, Mr. Howell was an avid, devoted English Setter breeder and authority, and an AKC multiple group and Best in Show Judge. He adjudicated over Westminster Kennel Club's 1985 Best in Show, and served as AKC Delegate for the English Setter Club of America. After a long and distinguished career, this larger-than-life figure admirably stood before the entire assembly of English Setter fanciers at their 1986 national specialty banquet and announced his retirement from judging. Reportedly, Mr. Howell placed his pride, his dignity on the forefront and, honoring his reputation, felt it necessary to resign after making one or more errors in his judging books by stating, "I cannot live with the knowledge that I am doing less than my best." Mr. Elsworth Howell was met with a standing ovation by his peers and protégées.

Mr. Elsworth Howell, a man of surpassing integrity and the dynamic, C. Bede Maxwell are to name just a few esteemed members of our sport who revered their reputations to such a degree, they understood and accepted when it was time to walk away. Precious, sage leadership for all of us today, these individuals and others like them who came before and after who have done the same, are to be admired for their utmost sincerity to our sport, or should I say to the sport that was...

