



MEMOIRS

Of The Sport's Former

GREATNESS

BY LISA DUBÉ-FORMAN

"We would like to live as we once lived, but history will not permit it."
— John F Kennedy

John F. Kennedy's rare eloquence revealed an old soul. A soul whose unnatural foresight produced poignant oratory, at times haunting, and extraordinarily stirring.

From this skillful use of words are parallels easily drawn to the sport of purebred dog competition. Corresponding in a reminiscent way of olden days when this sport was an uncommon privilege. In a measure, the sport once was a benefit enjoyed by certain persons beyond the advantages of most. With such privileges are remembrances of the grand shows of yesteryear such as the Morris & Essex Kennel Club, and the nostalgia of a very different Westminster Kennel Club show; and a long-gone era of esteemed dog authorities the likes of Ramona Van Court, Beatrice Goodsell, Percy Roberts, Henry Stoecker, Alva Rosenberg and William Kendrick, to name just a few. This was a regal epoch that was uninviting to inferiority. Expositions required the dogs to be benched, which in turn encouraged fanciers schooling and maturation. The shows of olden days were a celebration of the superb achievements of a privileged few as opposed to today bestowing honor on automated substandard-ness.

Today, the competitive sport is banal, almost foreseeable. One might contend that the unpredictability of judges' subjectivity and, therefore, their awards argues against this notion. However,

real life begs to differ as almost all fanciers, when prompted, will concur that the predictability is ubiquitous. It is a given that on occasion or in certain breeds awards can vary in breed competition, but the prolonged tedium is easily observed during Group and Best in Show competitions. Not just limited to these advanced competitions, predictability has been acknowledged by AKC officials as recently as the winter 2014 issue of the *Judges Standard* newsletter by an Executive Field Representative. The AKC admits to the very real disheartenment exhibitors experience by the utter predictability of competition. In this publication, the Representative acknowledges the resistance of some fanciers who no longer feel they can compete on a level playing field when having to compete against professionals, and will now only compete if Special Attractions are offered. Note, special attractions do not permit professionals in competition. The Executive Field Representative's article is forthright as she addresses some judges' apparent lack of enthusiasm for AKC Special Attractions, specifically bred-by, puppy, and veteran competitions, as well as the Owner-Handled series. The AKC's appeal is for judges to embrace the special attractions offered up by the kennel clubs and, in doing so, shoring up exhibitor and owner-handlers' overall emotional esteem.

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This sport has experienced a profound transformation having lost its specialness. It seems that nowadays fanciers feel they must finish each and every one of their dogs, despite the dog's lack of merit. It may take a little longer, but they'll get the dog finished. This is because modern breeding programs emphasize and boast the quantity of champions. Often the justification tendered is that the dog is still better than most of the other exhibited dogs, so why shouldn't it be shown? Many think that even if it was just a decent quality female, she must be bred. So, the tedious commonness persists in both competition and in breeding stock highlighting mediocrity or even comparatively poor stock. By no means are all dogs pedestrian, as it is an enormous relief to find a well-made dog exuding type and symmetry. Usually, though, these are bred by seasoned, well-reasoned breeders who understand that breeding purebred dogs are ongoing endeavors. Their strenuous efforts for perfection will be rewarded, for their own satisfaction or competition. As was the case five to eight decades past, history showed that the sport's illustrious and premier breeders such as Mrs. Geraldine Rockefeller Dodge bred to the highest standards of perfection. Continuous and painstaking efforts are involved in breeding, always striving to reach higher planes of achievement. This sport was filled with fabulously wealthy patrons who had genuine, elementary knowledge of canine husbandry. They possessed and nurtured artistic values and principles. These historical, famed breeders brandished their accomplishments in the show ring and many, dare say, would have been mortified exhibiting fair to middling dogs so commonplace in the show ring today.

There is no wonder why this sport has been reduced to such levels today. The profound extent of uninterestedness by the top echelons at AKC; the continued lack of leadership over these many years has brought about a 'dumbing down' of the sport's once venerable history. The endless obsessing and pursuit of revenue from voluminous registration numbers minimized, trivialized the once exceptional breeder. The apathy from management reverberated down through the ranks into show giving clubs. Now, a number of clubs appear to just 'go through the motions' holding their kennel club annual shows to fulfill a requirement so they do not lose their event privileges and/or territories. From there, the pervasiveness of indifference continued seeping, to the point of saturating the ranks of enthusiasts, breeders, and owner-handlers. Substandard specimens are the majority, and excellent specimens compose the minority. The dog show society emphasizes and embraces the number of wins and points as a determination of value and promotion disregarding the reality that almost any purebred dog can obtain a championship title if enough money is thrown at it. This is one portrayal of the dog show game today.

Inexplicably, leadership's apathy grows stronger even as the loss of integrity deals almost a fateful blow to this century-plus year old organization. Indeed, the descent continues even as the AKC acknowledges, "If we continue to lose entries, eventually judges are not going to be needed." However, hold the applause. Reading further it becomes clear that the AKC's official position

delivered in the *Judges Standard* newsletter is that losses are due to economics. They cite the challenging economy, the difficulties exhibitors are having with new regulation laws, skyrocketing veterinarian bills, food bills, and the cost of fuel and hotels. As if to say everything is hunky-dory at AKC. This argument flies in the face of the newly released numbers that the industry tracker American Pet Products Association (APPA) unveiled estimating that \$58.51 billion dollars will be spent on pets in the U.S. for 2014. An exploding industry growing annually, up nearly three billion dollars from 2013.

Alas, enthusiasts and hobbyists are doomed to suffer from continuing, ineffectual leadership during times of need and crisis.

Time and again there have been worthy suggestions from smart and thoughtful individuals to bridge the span and enormous chasms between today's dog shows and those of yesteryear. Chasms that have been created by AKC administrations driving proverbial wedges between the rare, exceptional breeders, dedicated seasoned fanciers and the AKC's business strategy. Most all these ideas have fallen on deaf ears. Prescient, well-meaning people, including this author, from outside the organization have attempted to arrest the downward slide by proposing pragmatic plans to deal with the loss of excellence and specialness. Although it is not possible to affect Father Time, a few ideas may reintroduce respect back into the adjudication process and the sport in general. One such legitimate plan set forth by the publisher of *The Canine Chronicle* entailed a multiple judges panel presiding over Groups and Best in Show at the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship. As Mr. Grabe suggested, these multiple judge panels would be unknown, not previously published. This is another key element allowing for and promoting marked objectivity over the power and influence of subjectivity. A baby step, but a step forward all the same as the successful implementation of such multiple judge panels could carry over to all regular conformation shows. Just one of many credible ideas tossed onto the scrap heap.

We can never go back, even though many of us would like to live as we once lived; but history will not permit it. This is undeniable but there are many who remain conscious and alert to the fact that there exist options to power a new era based on the same values the sport once held dear. The potential demise of the sport is due to a change in values, a pronounced loss of integrity. Integrity being the consistency of actions, values, methods, measures, principles, expectations and outcomes. Integrity is choosing to honor these morals and principles. The absence of which is felt and seen throughout all levels in this sport.



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