

# Musings

By Lisa Dube Forman

Musing over the recent Westminster Kennel Club (WKC) show has taken sentiments to new heights. This year includes irony involving WKC's proclamation for crowning "America's Dog" and astoundment at a shameless mockery of impartial judging.

First, if you read any of the dog show periodicals or engage in social media then you already are aware that, currently, our dog society's disposition can best be described as noxious and jaded. Having exchanged views with many long serving hobbyists, these adjectives reasonably summarize the dog community's pervading mood of and for anything pertaining to the American Kennel Club. There appears to be no end to the mounting negative commentary by exhibitors, breeders, and AKC Judges on various issues. All topics that manifest a significant impact on our passionate pursuits, such as the judging approval process, quality of judge's selections and disproportionate group competition. They include matters like the point system and the all-out crazed race for the Top Ten; the AKC Board of Directors reputation; a noted lack of enforcement against violators and wrongdoers, and what seems to be the exceedingly questionable future of the sport.

It is small wonder that enthusiasts and hobbyists are protesting vociferously these days, but that they are not objecting even more if they were to realize an important fact about the Westminster Kennel Club (WKC). This august organization's ranks do not include women. Females are not allowed to be members, yet this kennel club maintains that it is "America's Dog Show." How ironic that this revered institution claims such lofty, patriotic status while simultaneously denying our sports gender majority — women — membership in their club. Consider these profound statistics from the 2002 Delegates Meeting Minutes revealing that 75 percent of AKC breeders and 72 percent of puppy buyers are women. Long ago, the American Kennel Club established that breeders, ergo women, are the backbone of the sport, but women are not welcome as members of several kennel clubs — only their hard earned cash. In fact, Westminster Kennel Club is not the only kennel club in the United States that does not allow women members. The 2005 Delegate Meeting Minutes revealed there are supposedly 10 AKC member clubs that do not permit female membership. How can such an affront towards women, our sport's nucleus group, continue unchallenged and be celebrated annually? WKC professes to crown "America's Dog" just so long as American women who comprise 50.8 percent of the population "know their place". The Westminster Kennel Club is a gilded cage enclosing their male membership within the comfortable confines of antiquated conventions. Purposefully an Old Boys Club,

they celebrate and preserve their gender bias practices. Insofar as women, well, women are only necessary and welcome when the club needs exhibitor participation.

Each time I watch this celebrated dog show my mind returns to the 'behind the scenes' sex inequality. Yet, unfairness or bias was not limited to the organization's constituency roll. A particular incident took place during breed judging that reinforces the dog show community's prevailing, cynical state of mind. No wonder fanciers are disgusted, throwing their hands up in exasperation. Actions that did not merely give an impression of but created a dense cloud of impropriety.

The ethical transgression transpired when a Judge presided over a Best of Breed assignment which included a dog this judge very recently used at stud. The litter sired by this entry reportedly was whelped already. Destroying any sense of impartiality, the judge proceeded to award this stud dog Best of Breed over the competition and also awarded Select Dog to yet another dog they previously used at stud as well! The basis of sportsmanlike competition is to adjudicate with neutrality, imputing ethics, honesty, and common sense. Instead, this incident exposes a lack of common decency and an illiteracy for the Rules, Policies and Guidelines for dog show judges.

The responsibility for entering dogs that are ineligible or create a conflict of interest lies with the exhibitors, so says the AKC Rules & Policies Handbook for Conformation Judges. In fact, the Handbook states that awards won may be canceled, and exhibitors with repeat violations may receive reprimands or fines. A conflict of interest exists when a judge is influenced by any relationship or factor other than the merit of the dogs. As for the judge, their duty was onerous but clear. Situations such as this require a judge to excuse an exhibitor for causes even known only to them and they were obligated to recognize that a conflict of interest existed. Such as the occasion when AKC Judge Peter Green excused a handler from WKC Group Judging for this very reason. So too was this judge duty-bound to adjudicate in a neutral manner, demonstrating fairness and generosity towards the other exhibitors, but now their reputations are justifiably and seriously challenged.

Many exhibitors find breaches such as this unsurprising, due to widespread desensitization and weariness. Indeed, while discussing the transgression, a number of seasoned fanciers suggested that the AKC might deliberately overlook the situation because pitifully, there is a lack of faith in AKC propriety. In truth, Old Boy's Clubs still exist today in what AKC coins a "family sport" and unabashed examples of indecorum abound. But they are not benign as they have a perceptible influence on a sizable portion of enthusiasts who are sincerely disaffected. An alienation that may be the greatest influential factor in the future health of AKC dog competitions.