

Musings

By Lisa Dubé Forman

Musing over the recent Westminster Kennel Club dog show conjures up predictable emotions about the quality of selections, but this year has taken sentiments to new heights. This year it includes irony in the veiled contradictions about this admired club, and its claims of crowning “America’s Dog.” Accompanying this hypocrisy is a “no wonder” exasperation after watching a shameless mockery of the moral premise that fanciers should always have full faith in the impartiality of judges.

As a preface, if you read any of the dog show periodicals, participate in or monitor social media, contribute to chat lists then you already are aware that, currently, our dog society’s disposition can best be described as noxious and jaded. In my opinion, along with many other long-serving hobbyists, these adjectives reasonably summarize the dog community’s pervading mood of and for anything concerning the American Kennel Club. In these just mentioned media vehicles, there appears to be no end to the mounting negative commentary by exhibitors, breeders, and AKC Judges on various issues. Topics of discussions revealing a significant impact on our passionate pursuits, such as the judging approval process, quality of judge’s selections and the 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 venerable 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 entry monies. 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 were supposedly ten AKC member clubs that do not permit female membership. How can such an affront towards women, our sport’s nucleus group,

continue unchallenged and is celebrated annually? Westminster Kennel Club professes to crown "America's Dog"; that is as long as American women, who comprise more than 50.8 percent of the population, know and mind their place. WKC is a gilded cage enclosing the male membership within their comfortable confines of historical conventions. Purposefully an Old Boys Club with all the trappings of venerability and wealth as they preserve their social, antiquated premise. Insofar as women, well, women are only necessary when the club needs exhibitor and monetary participation.

Each time I watch this celebrated dog show my mind returns to the 'behind the scenes' gender inequality. Unfairness or bias is 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. A simple "no wonder" fanciers are disgusted, throwing their hands up in exasperation reaction. This judge's actions 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 that included a dog this very judge recently used at stud. The litter, sired by this Best of Breed entry, reportedly was whelped already. The judge then proceeded to award this dog Best of Breed over the competition, destroying any sense of impartiality. Also, the judge awarded Grand Championship points to another dog in BOB competition that they previously used at stud as well. The basis of sportsmanlike competition is to adjudicate with neutrality, imputing ethics, honesty, and common sense. This incident is an excellent example of outstandingly bad judgment on both the judges and exhibitor's part. It illustrates overall poor sportsmanlike behavior, which on its own is bewildering because Westminster Kennel Club dog show boasts enormous public prominence. Not to mention, breed competitions are both streamed live and archived, available anytime for fanciers to watch. Perhaps the judge and stud dog owner hoped that the exhibitors and or breed spectators, via ringside or live video streaming, were not aware of the recent mating(s), or even that they would accept this transgression without demur. Worse, it is possible that both the judge and the exhibitor saw nothing wrong with their actions.

The exhibitor's conduct is most certainly not condoned. In fact, 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 notes that awards won may be canceled, and exhibitors with repeat violations may receive reprimands or fines. As for the judge, their duty was onerous but clear. Situations such as this require a judge to excuse an exhibitor for causes known only to them as the judge was obligated to recognize that a conflict of interest existed. Such conflict of interest exists when a judge is influenced by any relationship or factor

other than the merit of the dogs. The judge's responsibility was to adjudicate in a neutral manner, demonstrating fairness and generosity towards the other exhibitors who quite possibly spent hundreds, perhaps thousand(s) dollars on entry, hotel, and travel expenses to attend this prestigious show. Now, the judge's comportment is justifiably and seriously challenged.

Many exhibitors find breaches such as this unsurprising, due to widespread desensitization and weariness. Indeed, while discussing the transgression, some 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 as a "family sport" and unabashed examples of indecorum abound. However, they are not benign as they have a perceptible influence on a sizable portion of enthusiasts who are sincerely disaffected. It is an alienation that may be the single greatest influential factor in the future health of AKC dog competitions.