

# Op-Ed

By Lisa Dubé-Forman

**O**p-Ed is frequently mistaken as an abbreviation for opinion editorial, but really is a shortened phrase for opposite the editorial. Opinion pieces were placed opposite newspaper editorials because they were interesting and it is my hope that my piece is as well. Above all, I do provide throughout the multi-tiered subject facts and details so it is not solely based on my opinion.

During the early part of November, AKC Judges received a dispatch from the AKC Judges Task Force (JTF). This being a committee of four men tasked with the responsibility of “continuing the ongoing improvement of all aspects of the dog show judging process from preparation and application to performance in the ring.”

The JTF email advised the judging fancy of a proposal devised by said committee to investigate various distance-learning possibilities for judging experience — the development of the AKC Canine College. In essence, the JTF was sending up a trial balloon but this one was different. Trial balloons are usually advanced tentatively to test public reaction, frequently used by government administrations. This one was not to *test* public opinion, but instead was and is a policy announcement advising the Fancy that the Canine College proposal was already submitted to the AKC Board of Directors. We were encouraged to provide comments, suggestions, critiques and corrections, and any such feedback they received would be considered before their final proposal’s scheduled presentation.

I speculate that our solicited feedback will be gratuitously swept under the rug to suffer the same fate as did our comments to the 2011 Smith ad hoc committee responsible for the new Judges Approval Process. At that point, our previous comments, suggestions, critiques and corrections had zero impact as evidenced by the swiftness of the foregoing committee’s program confirmation without necessary, substantive changes. Simply, it was a home run the first time up at bat. Déjà vu, here is another ad hoc committee forging through with more impractical ideas. As impractical, for example, as the ill-thought-out *Advancement by Invitation for New Breed & Approved Judges* policy from the new March 2012 judges approval process, before a moratorium was instituted. Once more the Fancy finds ourselves in the backseat while yet another revamping process is made to the Judges Approval Process image as it is hung out on a

clothesline and beaten with a carpetbeater.

Though this new JTF committee stipulates that the Canine College cannot replace all the valuable hands-on ways of learning about dogs, they feel it can be an efficient and effective component of an educational journey. I am an avant-garde younger generation judge but one who is spectacularly pragmatic. In my opinion, this new College program is a newfangled, unrealistic solution attempting to reinvent learning in what has always been a good, old-fashioned procedure. If you are unfamiliar with the proposed AKC Canine College program, a brief introduction follows:

On a computer screen, the participant is shown a class of six dogs, one by one, with a series of photographs showing side views, front, rear, head, and breed specific examination perspectives, and videos of movement, including down and back and around the ring for each dog. The participant chooses which images to view, and then places the first four dogs in order, first through fourth.

Validation: To determine the “correct” answers, the instrument would be given to ten different breed experts (chosen by the Parent Club), and their placings combined to form a consensus ranking of the six dogs. There would not be just one correct answer, rather a range of acceptable placements.

Of the JTF’s own volition, this very large program’s computer services cost and maintenance could be substantial. Why would the AKC even consider producing a virtual, computer-based simulation of a judging experience when the alternatives are straightforward? Inasmuch as the AKC has signaled interest for investment of monies into judges education, evaluation and recertification then we should do it the good, old-fashioned way. I propose we invest these monies instead in live judges clinics, not to be confused with the current annual Group Judging Institutes. I suggest ever-changing breed cluster clinics offered regionally — not sparsely — throughout the country, with frequency on no less than a quar-

*continued on page 236*

continued from page 234

terly basis, with affordable tuition, which will offer continuing education credits to judges.

To illustrate my suggestion, in any given quarter, there would be at least four, multi-breed cluster clinics being held throughout the country offering hands-on judging opportunities. For each sponsored breed, participant's are presented a class of six dogs, one by one, and taught breed specific examination perspectives in a mock show ring. The participants observe them in movement, including down and back and around the ring for each dog and then chooses and places the first four dogs in order, first through fourth. As in the proposed Canine College, there would not be just one correct answer, rather a range of acceptable placements. The Canine College model indicates their participant could compare his or her answers to the preferred responses of the breed experts who pre-recorded their explanation for each of their placements so that the participant could learn why the dogs should be placed in a particular order. In contrast, my proposed hands-on, live, judges clinic allows the participant, if challenged, the ability to reevaluate or reconfirm their conclusions on the live dogs while asking pertinent questions. Compare this to a participant on a computer who cannot reconfirm and/or query as to the truth of pre-recorded explanations regarding the dogs and their placements.

The JTF admits that the Canine College has known challenges and acknowledges it would not duplicate the touch and feel of an actual dog examination, especially in coated breeds. However, the mere acknowledgment of the program's shortcomings should not dismiss the totality of logic which dictates this type of study is not sufficient. Virtual images are not acceptable for schooling in conformation adjudication because it is knowledge best acquired through methodical contact processes on live dogs, especially for aspiring judges. Coated breeds require physical interaction to estimate and evaluate scapula layback — one of the most difficult canine structural learning aspects — the point of shoulder articulation with the humerus to the point of articulation with the elbow joint. We need to ascertain by touch, the depth, width and amount of fill in the thoracic cavity, in addition to the length of sternum as the hands glide onwards determining if a dog is well-ribbed back. We must be able to feel the soundness of coupling, the critical loin muscling, girdle musculature, and rump muscling. What of the level of resistance, the condition of the vital superficial gluteal and bicep thigh muscles, all very important factors in award placements? None which can be gauged via virtual simulation.

The chasm between mine and their proposed program is enormous. One reality is that the Canine College participant is dictated the results by a degree of percentages and in my suggested clinic, the participant is taught the reasons why via palpation. Allow me to explain, the Canine College is reminiscent of *The Canine Chronicle* series, "Breed Priorities" by Nikki Riggsbee. This is a popular column that offers silhouettes of a breed — e.g., 6 males and 6 females — and the reader ranks the dogs in order of preference. The reader then selects Best of Breed and Best of Opposite, after which you read on to see how your rankings did as compared to the rankings by the breeder/judge authorities. Riggsbee's column provides the rankings in percentages, such as 40% of breeder/judges selected Dog C as their first place with commentary on why, 25% ranked Dog A as their second choice, and so forth. Their placings are combined to form a consensus ranking of the dogs. I enjoy this pleas-

urable column but I do not believe that this process qualifies as an instruction tool on to how to place them in real time competition as there are too many, if, ands, or buts. However, according to the JTF proposal, scores produced by this Canine College will be used to evaluate a judge. Per se, how well the judge's choices matched those of the experts — and would be useful data for consideration by the Judges Review Committee on an aspiring or applying judge.

I liken this to my watching the AKC official breed videos for my applied breeds and from these, rank my first four dogs in order. The official breed videos are very helpful visual aids to acquaint the observer with a breed's typical stride, gait and foot-fall patterns, coat colors and patterns. We can assess the quality of forward motion, the dog's equilibrium, maintenance of shape on the move, but using these videos to determine coated breeds rank is not fair or reasonable. In the near future should we anticipate competing in conformation dog shows with our judges 3,000 miles away as the competition is streamed live via the web to them?

As a breeder and exhibitor of three decades, unquestionably I am not in favor of having a judge's learning component, or recertification in my breed based on a computer simulation. Nor do I feel is it legitimate for a Field Representative acquiring breed education — the JTF proposes this model should help aspiring or potential Field Reps to enhance their learning on the large number of breeds that they need to know and understand in order to perform their job well, and would be a good review tool for the continuing education of all Field Reps. Am I the only one who perceives this statement as revealing?

The Canine College program is fraught with character flaws that can turn the tide against the welfare of our many breeds, especially those at risk today due to popular trends. It is heavily dependent on Parent Breed Clubs supplying Breed Experts. This Task Force is obliged to recognize that many of today's Parent Breed Clubs are not the stalwart bodies of the olden days and are not administered by the same knowledgeable dog authorities as yesteryear. Granted that a small number of parent clubs offer high quality instruction, it is equally true that others have fanciers administering their parent breed clubs who are unschooled, unversed in canine anatomy and musculature and are unable to converse on type and soundness. Corroboration of this occurs often when judges participate in formal ringside breed mentoring programs and the occasional breed presentations or lectures. It is no longer unusual to have an assigned Parent Breed Club Mentor who is unable to answer questions about breed anatomy, such as the correct angle of the 'croup'. In response, these breed experts ask, "what is a croup?" On other occasions, several assigned mentors could not define or discuss the thorax when questioned about breed exhibits who were herring-gutted. Personal 'likes and dislikes' also contributes heavily to unqualified club mentoring. In a perfect world, this College model may work, however, in today's dog world societies, one must accept the likelihood that Parent Breed Club experts are liable to be in such a favored position because of relationships rather than expertise. Many outstanding, knowledgeable breeders are neither members of their Parent Breed Club Education Committees nor are welcome to be a member due to personality issues, and/or disagreements with harmful phenotype trends.

An oft-quoted assurance, as echoed by the JTF, is the Judges Review Committee will not place significant dependence on just one

continued on page 238



continued from page 236

component of education but as an element of a whole. This statement is inaccurate, and if you are a judge who has recently applied for additional breeds, under the new Judges Approval Process, you may agree. Current application procedure is to supply the Judges Review Committee with written synopses on each breed, including all information that may be relevant relating to the applicant's education and experience for each breed in which they have applied. This includes qualifications but not limited to seminars, workshops, institutes, mentors, and personal experience with the breed and previous judging experiences. We must explain why we are applying for the breed and what we have accomplished in preparation.

It is a fact of record that the Judges Review Committee (JRC) will deny an applicant based on one component as I have been the victim of such premature attention to one particular element. I am willing to share my experience as many readers may identify with their own situation which, unfortunately, I have on good authority they are numerous. As a knowledgeable dog, particularly Hound authority, I applied for and was recently denied a majority of additional breeds based on, "*history of judging as displayed through Field Staff Reports was minimal.*"

Previously in 2012, I was accorded an 'exception' in my judging process thus facilitating my advancement from provisional to regular status without my having three Field Staff Reports or comprehensive evaluations. The impasse mitigating my advancement began in 2008, after I was approved for Afghan Hounds as my second breed. Over the course of four years, I traveled cross-country 16,000 miles, paying my own expenses for six assignments and adjudicated 65 Afghan Hounds in competition, but I was able to obtain *only* two Executive Field Representative evaluations. Field staff reports that were unavailable for me to originally obtain because the AKC has felt the pinch of economic unease and its austerity measures do not permit nor do they have the personnel to properly administer to their requirement.

A recent Judges Review Committee zeroed in on the one component desiring multiple Field Staff Reports, and imposed limitations on my judging advancement due to my lack of such. This resulted in a surreal parody granting me only 33% of the breeds for which I applied, because the committee's tunnel vision precluded them from reviewing and thoroughly considering the entirety of my additional breed applications. Applications with meticulous breed synopses of outstanding quality and quantity detailing breed origins and development, essence, virtues and faults, colors and patterns. Applications detailing noteworthy education experiences including two separate four-day Hound Group Judging Institutes, along with the scores of individual breed seminars, Parent Breed Club judges education programs and ample formal ringside mentoring. This Judges Review Committee ignored résumé details regarding my published articles on anatomy, to include the arrangement of and relations between the parts and elements of the complex canine skeletal system, muscling physiology and locomotion nor did they consider my internationally published feature series *Hounds*, *Toplines* and *Underlines* expounding nearly all my additional hound breeds. Nor did the committee consider my judging experience in almost all the breeds applied for, to include several rare breeds along with Specialty Matches. In brief, the committee appeared to set aside the judgement and recommendations of their Senior Executive Field Representa-

tive, who after concluding my interview of several hours, passed me on all the breeds in which I applied as well as both wicket and scale exams. For all that, the Judges Review Committee summarily informed me that my, "*lack of Field Staff Reports did not warrant awarding me the magnitude of breeds requested.*" An especially ironic determination in spite of my 42 pages of breed essays and application fees of \$375.00.

The above experience serves as the ideal exemplification that the Judges Review Committee has and will continue to focus on singular aspects of our educational journeys rather than the whole. Unfortunately, mine is not the only case of injustice occurring today. The Senior Conformation Judges Association (SCJA) has received a succession of pleas and complaints from judges who have met with similar fates as mine, some who are members of the SCJA, and others who are not. Our cases raise legitimate concerns about the Judges Review Committee (JRC) as the central figures of the new approval process. We have logical concerns confirming our need for freedom of information as to who is exercising oversight over this committee and the level and frequency of such. As it stands, it is three members appointed to plow through numerous synopses contained within breed applications submitted by fellow judges and this JRC alone decides who of their contemporaries or peers are afforded additional privileges. In my estimation, the new JRC is influenced by the notion that talented, upcoming, younger generation judges should 'pay their dues' slowly, as they did. In like fashion, particularly my case, the previous, obsolete judges approval system of 'one for one, two for two' was a dominating factor in their decision. For those unfamiliar with this term, this meant that a new breed judge applied for one breed, completed provisional status, applied for regular status, and on their second application they could only apply for one additional breed — hence, one for one, two for two.

As I have detailed before, I am very much in favor of compulsory continuing education requirements for judging licensure renewals, similar to real estate brokerage. I propose that participant's earn the required continuing education requirements at their leisure throughout a specified timeframe, such as three years, and over the course of this time the judge must complete the credits for license renewal. My aforementioned clinics are the ideal arena to satisfy these credits, along with current customary avenues we partake in for education components. I suggest that a modified version of this Canine College could be very helpful for aspiring judges to learn basic ring procedures, instruction on proper course of action during dog on dog aggression incidents, exhibitor protests, wicket and scale examinations, and so forth.

Last but not most certainly not least, I will point out there are no female members on the ad hoc Judging Task Force. Why is it that this Task Force is comprised wholly by men in a sport dominated by women? According to the data, approximately 50% of Conformation Group Judges and 67% of Obedience/Rally/Tracking Judges are women. Moreover, 60% of the Delegate Body consists of women who also make-up 67% of the Delegate Standing Committee Chairs. As a last measure, according to cited demographics from AKC Delegate Meeting Minutes, 75% of breeders are women but also make up 72% of purebred dog buyers. At the risk of being facetious, perhaps no women warranted a seat on this Judges Task Force.