



SIZE does matter

by Lisa Dubé Forman

Who was it that commanded dog show rings are to be uniform in size regardless of the size of breed exhibited? The logic of disregarding stride length for homogeneity escapes me. I find this not only illogical, it is inequitable. Some promptly theorize the reason is due to insufficient level areas needed to accommodate generously-sized rings at outdoor shows. If true, then the show grounds may be unsuitable for the conformation show's purpose. A kennel club's responsibility is to select appropriate grounds capable of meeting the requirements of an unknown entry. For this reason, a kennel club needs to find a more fitting location. However, in my showing experience this theory cannot be the reason. Over the many years, I have attended countless outdoor shows having standardized, small rings; however, there was ample room for expansion to offer generous ring space.

Could this standardization be the brainchild of the show superintendents? It is merely supposition when I wonder if this is due to the superintendents' streamlining process to expedite their company's set-up, break-down procedures and also may limit the need for additional tenting. If I am correct, this does not absolve their client, the kennel club, of its' responsibility to their exhibitors. Exhibitors spend their hard-earned money (without either a show cannot be held) and so they have the right to expect appropriate breed-sized show rings for optimal presentation of their dog. If you have any experience in conformation shows, you know first-hand there are many dogs of the same breed that do not move as well as one another. Knowing this, then why is there a concerted effort by show authorities to liken the gait of all the recognized breeds within identical-sized rings? I feel it is the responsibility of the Superintendent under supervision of the show-giving club to provide enough equipment for amply-sized rings to accommo-

date all the plentiful, various-sized breeds. To the best of my knowledge over 27 years, we exhibitors have not paid varying entry fees based on the Superintendents providing large and spacious or small and unreasonable show rings.

We can set aside the exceptions such as an all-breed show with an outsized entry due to a breed club's supported entry or a breed specialty held in conjunction with that all-breed show. These exceptions will usually obligate a Superintendent and club to provide one or two larger-than-average rings to accommodate large classes.

For the most part our rings are unvarying in size but our dogs are not uniform in size. Our dog's gaits are not uniform. Commonly, today's ring size does not vary no matter if you are showing a Chihuahua or an Irish Wolfhound. It makes no sense whatsoever to have a dog measuring 34 inches or more at the shoulder gaited around a ring that also accommodated a few Petite Basset Griffon Vendéens. The Beagle does not move out like a Borzoi or Afghan Hound nor does a Basenji have the similar stride span as does an Irish Wolfhound regardless if they all are hunting hounds. Why is there such inequitable treatment of the breeds? Why do we have giant breeds with leg length from elbow to ground measuring nearly 2 feet or more, capable of reaching speeds of 28 miles per hour exhibiting in rings meant for miniature breeds?

One of the memorable and disappointing experiences these past 12 months was when we exhibited at a celebrated kennel club's outdoor, all-breed show. First, I must point out that I have exhibited at dogs shows for 27 years and I insist the ring was even smaller than the standardized, inappropriate, all-breed rings seen nowadays. When we approached we were both surprised and upset. It was confounding why the show organizers would sentence enormous hunting dogs to a ring that was clearly too small.

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My quiet husband who has a high tolerance for frustrating situations was even commenting about the insufficient size. The assignment of such a ring was disrespectful to the exhibitors, our entry fees and, most importantly, to our breed. Not only insulting, it was prohibitive in showcasing my dog's easy and active gait. Is it a logical fallacy that exhibitors' money is meaningful any longer?

Why would the "powers that be" schedule Irish Wolfhounds to the same undersized, incompatible ring that accommodated a handful of 13- and 15-inch Beagles? One can only deduce that it was to facilitate the judging schedule since the judge was assigned both breeds. The issue is that the show administrators dismissed the breed's basic requirements. In this case they did not consider it necessary to have the judge walk a few hundred feet to a considerably larger, more appropriately-sized ring. The show grounds boasted ample room for expansion or creation of generously-sized, breed-specific rings though they did not utilize the space. This situation was an obvious disservice to our breed and its competition. As I have stated beforehand,

this is not an isolated case and does not happen only to our giant breed. Reasonably, one would expect the presiding judge to complain to the show superintendent and club authorities about scheduling a giant breed to such a tiny ring. However, sadly, it was immediately apparent our judge did not find issue with the size or shape of the ring. I was the first of our breed to exhibit and the judge, without vacillating, requested I perform a triangle instead of a down and back! This pattern in a ring sized for a Beagle?

Let me pause here as I assume that all of you are fluent in "show speak" and I do not need to explain performing a triangle. So I will ask you to envisage this occurring to you. Here you are with a Greyhound-like, hunting hound weighing 200 pounds that is capable of taking down any large game. This dog measures 36" inches at the shoulder with a body length of around three and a half feet from prosternum to point of buttocks. Imagine the judge requesting you perform a triangle in what may be the smallest ring you've exhibited in. Upon hearing this I confess the look of disbelief on my face must have been priceless as I asked the judge to repeat his instructions to make certain I heard him clearly. As it is unacceptable to argue with a judge, I performed a triangle instead of the typical down and back pattern that would have been especially appropriate for this situation. Suffice to say the dog was unable to complete barely a few strides before I nearly tripped and fell over the ring perimeter. This required me to stop the dog and turn him in a circle around me to head in the other direction. Again barely a few strides before repeating the clumsy turn at the other corner before returning to the judge. The judge clearly recognized the error of his request and changed his judging pattern after my class as he did not request the same later on when I exhibited another entry. For the record, I did write a complaint about the ring size to both the Superintendent and the Show Chair though both remained unresponsive. We feel they got our money

so too bad if we did not like it.

Any person with an Internet connection can research how dog shows initially began in the United States. Much information claims the concept began in the late 1800s by sporting gentlemen in New York City who loved to compare stories about their hunting dogs. The ensuing competitions were motivated by whose dog was better not only in the field but away from the field. The American Kennel Club (AKC) established in 1884 became the governing body and as the years passed dog shows became much more organized and financially driven resulting in today's model. AKC explains that conformation shows are to evaluate breeding

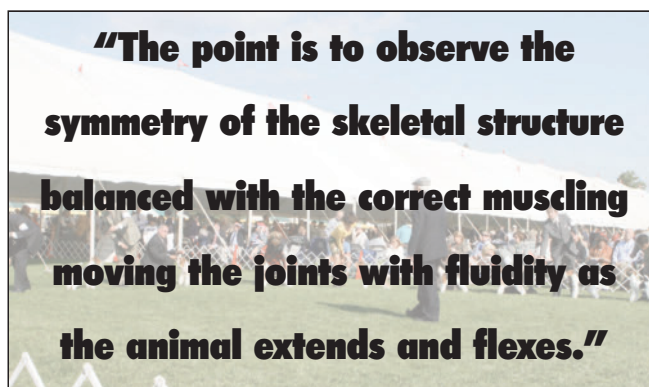
stock with the dogs overall appearance and structure as an indication of the dogs ability to produce quality puppies. The judge is to view each dog in profile for overall balance, and watch each dog gait—move—to see how all of those features fit together in action. In the end it is a determination as to who is the best dog to perpetuate a breed.

Today a conformation show is a 1-2 minute race to pass judgment over each entry in a very small area. I have always

wondered about the legitimacy of judgment when occasionally an adjudicator places—not runs—their hands no more than three times on key areas of a dog. These touches supposedly qualify as an examination. After this brief contact, the dog moves in a designated pattern. I know there are multitudes of you who have to admit, reluctantly or not, that it has happened to you—this same judge oftentimes barely watches, if at all, your entry moving out around the ring.

The irony is that moving out for most breeds—gaiting—around the ring brings forth connotations of actually allowing the animal space to move. We like to see true reach and drive. The dog reaches out with forelimbs while propelling—driving from the hindquarters with flexed hocks in the expected two-beat diagonal trot. However, the physical action of moving out your dog is now just a suggestion or better yet a turn of phrase. Realistically, with many of our large, athletic breeds the dogs are provided only enough room for a few strides until reaching a fence boundary. Bear in mind we must always be mindful of the hazardous tenting anchors which further reduce maneuverability and useable ring space. On the go-around, a large athletic dog reaches the corner quickly in two or three strides and its gait changes as the handler is turning the dog's body in a different direction. This hinders observation while the dog moves away at an angle. Plus many times we have other exhibitors lined up on one side further reducing useable space for gaiting.

This is far from describing an ideal spacious, generous ring in which our athletic dogs can stride out with ease as they relax their bodies. The main goal of this exercise is to supply a judge a true picture of that particular dog. The point is to observe the symmetry of the skeletal structure balanced with the correct muscling moving the joints with fluidity as the animal extends and flexes. You cannot see this when the dog is abruptly slowing down or



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changing gait and speed.

All breed shows need to provide show rings geared towards those specific breeds' whose sizes and gaits require much larger dimensions than today's average ring. I understand tenting and equipment affects overall costs but exhibitor's pay on average \$27-\$32-\$39 per entry. This is our well-earned money supporting these shows. It is not unjust nor is it a burden to expect generously-sized breed rings so exhibitors can properly showcase their dogs. It boggles my mind how so many of us have submissively accepted these confined areas as suitable.

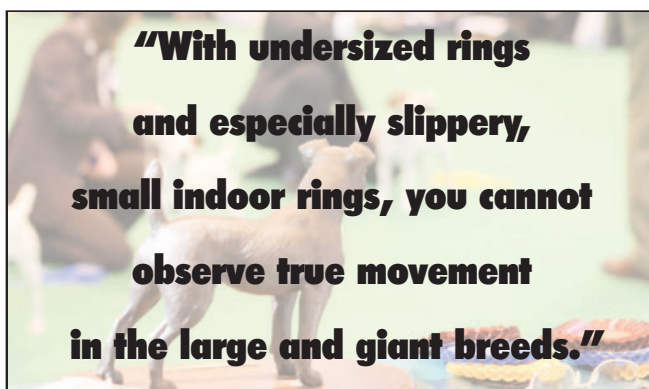
Nowadays, we have seen many shows once held outside are indoors due to unpredictable weather. Their show rings shape and size will vary due to the buildings constraints. The majority, though, have inadequate rubber matting inside the rings to highlight gaiting patterns covering slick floors. Nearly all of these show rings can be dangerous for both dog and handler with the big concern being injury of our dogs. Injuries sustained on such slippery surfaces can result in thousands of dollars in veterinary care. The other obvious risk is injury to oneself that can sideline handlers for months. Got disability insurance? In the ideal world these showgiving clubs would invest in floor covering such as an economy grade grass carpeting to blanket completely their indoor show rings but rarely have I seen it.

It is not uncommon for exhibitors to state that their dog(s) does not show well indoors. Well, it's no wonder. Most every experienced handler will attest that you can detect tenseness, stilted gait or stride without looking as the handler senses this rising up through the lead. This occurs when the dog is unsure of its footing. Many times the dog moves out and immediately slips on the go-around or at the slippery corners as the handler tries to share the mat with their dog. After a dog slips, many times an experienced observer can detect an immediate difference in the dog's gait as the animal tenses up and moves uncomfortably for fear of falling. So oftentimes that is the finale for your entry. It is good money down the drain because you no longer have a relaxed exhibit as he moves awkwardly the remainder of the ring or, worse, is injured and limping. If a dog gets hurt, after slipping on an indoor show floor, and comes up lame while in the ring then you're out. It doesn't matter who or what is to blame, how much money you've spent to get to the show, nor the distance traveled. If the dog is lame in the ring during the minute-plus allotted, then the dog cannot continue competing. Aside from the serious concern of having an injured dog it is also very disheartening. Speaking for myself, I lead a full, busy life and it takes quite a bit of organizing on my part to attend shows. Not just the hours spent grooming and hand-stripping but management of our other dogs, arranging hotel accommodations, stocking food and treats, sched-

uling and briefing the house sitter, hours packing the van and then travelling on average for three days. A bad weekend can be very disappointing and expensive indeed.

Our judges make their placements or awards based on examination and movement. With undersized rings and especially slippery, small indoor rings, you cannot observe true movement in the large and giant breeds. Good judges have limited opportunity to observe with perhaps three full strides to make their determination. One may have difficulty in seeing how all of the breed's

features fit together in action. An interesting note aside; in the beginning of his career, even the legendary Secretariat required racing distance to give him a chance to find his legs in a horse-race. One wonders what might have happened if Secretariat had not been under the skilled tutelage of this particular duo of trainer and owner. If he were not given the opportunities, we may never have experienced his unsurpassed achievements along with the widely-held belief that Secretariat



was our 20th century's greatest athlete.

This beloved sport of ours is diminishing in so many aspects as it is a profitable business to many. For the common exhibitors who financially support the shows, it remains a passion. The sport has moved far off the mark from when the sporting men clashed over whose dogs were best. Why don't we get back to the basics again? Our sport is about dogs--that is why we call it a dog show. It is not a people show. Why not have custom-sized show rings for those large and giant breeds that supplies generous room to showcase their fundamental breed characteristics? Have you not seen a dog that moves better and better the more it warms up? Better yet, how many times have you seen dogs that start to fall apart the more they move? The typical, small, all-breed rings are just perfect for the latter. I have seen top-winning dogs of various breeds from the all breed circuits simply fall apart while gaiting during their specialty shows. The reason for this is simple. Specialties, for the most part, provide huge show rings. As an exhibitor I use the whole ring and as a judge, I request exhibitors do the same.

My suggestion is to plan for and accommodate those breeds who require generously-sized breed rings. Advertise this on the cover page of your Premium List. Showing respect for and recognizing that all breeds are not of the same cookie-cutter mold coupled with careful programming does make a difference with exhibitors. Once exhibitors learn your club show is contrasting to the ordinary, yours being more breed-friendly, then exhibitors will enthusiastically support you. They'll make it a must-stop on their show circuit because it will be an enjoyable show experience. It is about creating a pleasurable atmosphere which makes people feel it was well worth their money to participate. Win or lose.