

THE DOG SHOW GAME TELLING IT LIKE IT IS!

By Lisa Dubé Forman

Editor's Note: This article is the opinion of the author and does not necessarily reflect the views or opinions of the publisher or staff of The Canine Chronicle.

This may be old news to most of you but I believe the sport of purebred dogs, using media hype terminology, is in "critical condition." I am neither the standard bearer of this message nor a professional writer.

I am an exhibitor and breeder of 25 years and, as such, I am no stranger to purebred dog competitive events. I have not yet achieved 40, 50 or 60 years as many renowned authors/breeders have accomplished but it does not diminish my opinion on what is happening today. Having received and read a great many of the published articles in recent years discussing what other authors believe to be causal factors of the decline in our sport and for that matter, the AKC; I finally set forth my own beliefs. After much observation over the course of my quarter century I can only describe what is happening as a transformation of our sport.

As I said there are many articles written about the devolving sport of showing dogs and there are some ar-

ticles that remain skeptical that any legitimate problem exists- -they state dog show entries remain at decent levels across the country. The preamble of the AKC Code of Sportsmanship in part states, "...The sport of purebred dog competitive events dates prior to 1884, the year of AKC's birth...Many believe that these principles of sportsmanship are the prime reason why our sport has thrived for over one hundred years."

Wouldn't it be logical to assume that if our sport is and has been thriving, shouldn't entries and registrations be increasing accordingly? Shouldn't financial revenues increase rather than remaining static? Some all-breed club shows have fallen below their average number of entries. Is this simply due to an increasing number of shows spreading out the number of entries? If our sport is thriving then why aren't these smaller shows entries increasing due to the excitement and dedication of the exhibitors? Herein I set forth other possibilities why the

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sport and ultimately the AKC have experienced a financial and motivational crisis.

The articles that “tell it like it is” receive overwhelming replies from readers—replies which mostly are in harmony with the “real story” about what is going on out there every weekend. These replies portray what many consider a generally dark mood of dog show exhibitors. It seems that from my many conversations with authors and experienced breeders/exhibitors, readers feel compelled to write an email or letter in support of the “telling it like it is” articles, relieved that finally someone had the fortitude to take a stand and speak out against the status quo. Interestingly enough, many of these people would not be inclined to pen a letter in disagreement after reading supportive articles.

Mostly they say, “Why bother, it won’t change anything.” I fear this despairing attitude is spreading throughout the ranks.

What is happening at the all-breed level is distressing. People are leaving the sport and they are doing so vocally—some are cynical and disgusted. Recently my husband, who is a novice to the dog show scene, and I spoke about sports in general. We chatted about the differences between being in a sport such as ours compared to other sports like competitive sailing, triathlons, football or equestrian show jumping. In these and most all other sports the outcome is dependent on the performance of the participant themselves compared to dog shows which can be subjective; sometimes wildly so. Exhibitors expect knowledgeable evaluations and decisions. But today it seems that perhaps that is asking too much! Personally, I feel that again and again uninformed decisions are made and intermittently, a prejudicial process of choosing accompanies such decisions.

PROFESSIONALS

Competent exhibitors regularly compete against professional handlers. These experienced people whether they be breeders or owner handlers are acquainted with this competitive scenario all too well and it is interesting to hear what their analysis are show after show, weekend after weekend. How do you fare? Typically the Handler is constantly on the show circuit weekend after weekend, month after month showing clients’ dogs and they may also enjoy public prominence from advertisements in magazines. On a number of occasions based on my observations of very competitive Best of Breed classes I have been left with the impression that awards appear not to be based on the BOB dog being an exemplary specimen of its breed versus its competition but rather the dog’s visibility as many are on a quest to accumulate highly sought after breed and group points. Let’s face reality; these professional handlers’ financial contributions are considerable to our sport. Everyone is well acquainted with the Top Ten in each breed and the Top Dogs in each group. This is a highly competitive goal. I find it both remarkable and amusing that some dogs ranked amongst the Top Ten of their breed have not been awarded nor are even shown at Breed Specialties but only at all-breed shows. In some cases I am convinced that the dog is “put up” based on

its marketing rather than its merits.

In the classes there is the implementation of the Amateur Handler Class and this is a praiseworthy effort on the part of AKC. It seems reasonable or safe to assume that the AKC must be aware of owner handler issues when competing against professionals otherwise it would not have created such a class. It may take a few years to catch on or it may not make a difference whatsoever in Winners competition. I feel an important question to ask is this: do repetitive judging assignments across our country and Handler occupations requiring them to cover large geographic areas make our purebred dog events subjective? There are a great many exhibitors who wonder if some of today’s judges are judging in such regularity throughout the country that one wonders if this is a source of income instead of a passionate pursuit to evaluate breeding stock, to preserve and protect the breeds from degradation. Is there any grassroots support for a proposal to limit the number of judging assignments a judge can accept in one year’s time as suggested by Tom Grabe in a recent editorial? I believe this idea certainly has great merit as the expectation would be that it allows other judges to gain valuable experience and confidence in breeds they are approved for but either rarely judge or are not invited to judge. This point also relates to an issue I discuss next and also further down, “Standout dogs being shown the ring exit.”

DOG SHOW CLASS DISADVANTAGES

Dog show class prejudices can occur. As any experienced exhibitor/breeder can tell you it is not an absolute but it does happen to the point that it is acknowledged and has been personally experienced. In recent years, I have witnessed what appears to me to be yet another interesting judging inclination. In a number of breed competitions where dogs were in the ring competing for Winners, the Bred by Exhibitor class entry had been awarded Winners amongst the competition. The decisions seemed to have been made quickly, sometimes within seconds, and appear to demonstrate a lack of breed knowledge. Amongst well-seasoned exhibitors we refer to this as the “fallback” or “standby,” a safety measure by going with a breeder because of a lack of breed knowledge and/or a lack of confidence on the judge’s part when judging a breed they are neither familiar nor comfortable with. On occasion there have been “standout” dogs entered in Novice, American Bred or Open and in the seconds that transpire these other class winners appeared not to be considered for Winners when in competition with a “Bred by” class entry, particularly if the judge needs to move on to their other assignments.

Yes, an argument can be made that ringside judging is convenient similar to “armchair quarterbacking.” Judges approved for the breeds they are reviewing are considered by AKC to be an expert in that breed so if you compare for yourself then you’d better know the breed standard! Therefore, for those interested when observing class judging stand in an area outside the ring that affords the best field of vision. When the dogs are moving down and back position yourself in the line of sight on either end

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of the ring to observe the dog moving. See what the judges see. Whenever possible and as long as it is far removed from the show rings, take the opportunity and request to “go over” the dogs you observed being judged. But do so only very politely without opining and absent any judging commentary. Feel for yourself.

25 years ago when I first began exhibiting, the trend was that the Open Class entrant was typically awarded Winners. It was a very frustrating experience. Now it is surprising that if correct, there may be a tendency which has swung like a pendulum to the other extreme.

Let's not forget that breeders do show dogs in Open, Novice and American Bred classes especially if their entry was sired by the breeder's stud dog from an outside dam, but technically they are not the breeder of record. Let us also not forget that an entry in Open, American Bred or Novice class could represent numerous generations from a kennel line.

The perception of class preferences are familiar amongst exhibitors, so much so that a friend who is long experienced in dog shows for over 40 years and who is well-known at shows in their part of the country exclaimed to me that they never enter American Bred class at an all-breed show. They passionately explained their reasons by stating that showing in “Am Bred” can affect ones chances of winning Open class and/or being awarded Winners because many novices will exhibit in “Am Bred,” certainly not professional handlers. They went on to explain that if you are not in “Bred by” then you have a better chance of winning out of the Open class as hopefully there may be a chance you could be mistaken for a Handler when going up against the “Bred by” for Winners! They believed that many judges who were professional handlers in the distant past by and large do not award out of Am Bred or Novice classes. I inquired as to why it mattered what class one is entered in if your dog is superior quality and is behaving well. My friend simply said, “That's the dog show game.”

Allow me to recount a personal experience that occurred at a well attended and well represented breed specialty. During this Specialty I was honored to have been awarded Winners by an esteemed multi breed/group judge. As the dogs were being moved the Judge awarded me Winners and as I approached, the Judge asked me what class I was from. I informed them I was from the Novice class and they were visibly taken aback exclaiming, “Novice!” Afterward still stunned that their Specialty Winners was from Novice and as we were taking photos the judge quietly inquired of me, “Novice Class! Hasn't this dog ever won anything before?” I had to explain that it was quite a young dog having only previously been shown as a puppy. This was both deflating and disconcerting. Class disadvantage? Would the outcome have been the same if the judge knew what class I was representing?

LET'S GET MOVING

The 2.5 or even 2 minutes per dog time allotment is obsolete. Today's exhibitor is usually subjected to an examination and judg-

ment in one minute or even less. And if that exhibitor takes their time, or is not “bam, bam, bam,” then on occasion that person is subjected to the wrath of the judge who snaps loudly, “move it along” or “let's go!” These judging times are not an exaggeration and I encourage you to bring along a watch with a second hand on it to the next all-breed show you attend and while ringside, start computing the time allowed for an average dog examination. I recall an incident at a very nice sized limited breed show when I was exhibiting my dog and as the judge was finishing their examination I was already well into the process of rolling up my show lead in my hand to move the dog for the down and back when the judge scolded me for taking too long stating, “come on, lets get moving, I'm behind schedule!” They said this none too politely either and frankly, it is embarrassing. Should we really wonder why newcomers are leaving this sport?

As a spectator I attended another breed's large national specialty presided over by a renowned multi breed/group judge and truthfully, I have never experienced nor observed such fast judging before. So quick in fact that I, having shown dogs for 25 years, was astonished and all around me people were commenting and complaining. The following morning at the commencement of judging I was informed another spectator brought a stopwatch and as judging began they timed the judge per examination of dogs and in the afternoon supposedly the average time allotted came out to be 49 seconds per dog! As a breeder and exhibitor, I can only sympathize with these people who paid hard earned money to enter their dogs for evaluation by an esteemed judge, many traveling great distances, some cross country, to experience such great disappointment or elation in record breaking time.

GRACIOUSNESS

Interspersed with the hurried examination trend is the all too frequent absence of civility. How many of you have entered a ring and upon examination offered a “Good Morning or Good Afternoon” to the judge and had no reply, not even a grunt of acknowledgment but rather a stone cold stare? It happens to me so frequently that sometimes I dread exhibiting at all breed shows and subjecting myself to such blatant rudeness. Once, while waiting in line to be examined I was publicly reprimanded by a Judge for bringing a small treat in the ring to keep my dog interested, I was told that treats should not be used whatsoever. Ironically, upon examination that same judge pulled out and shook Tic Tacs to get the dogs attention! I have had encounters with judges who have been so bad-mannered that even after they awarded me points I promised myself that I would not show under them again. To quote the author Elsie De Wolfe, “Be pretty if you can, be witty if you must, but be gracious if it kills you.”

I believe that politeness begets politeness: in and out of the ring. There are a number of uncivil judges nowadays and this is not only upsetting but has an effect on exhibitors, new and old. I do not understand why many judges who have the great honor of

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being approved for multiple breeds and or Group(s) behave so pretentiously as if they are performing a favor to the exhibitors by judging our entries when as a reminder, they are paid to examine our dogs. I am adamant that if the judge cannot display welcoming courtesy to exhibitors then he or she should not accept the assignments. If they do not enjoy the evaluation process and the sport itself why accept the assignments? How many judges appear absolutely miserable in the ring and bark out orders or wordlessly flick their hands in a vague direction that exhibitors are supposed to decipher? Basically, it boils down to this: it's a simple lack of respect for exhibitors. There are many exceptions whereupon judges will cite rudeness of the exhibitors and I know these occurrences take place but it does not give one license to be rude first, as if launching a preemptive strike. Judges displaying courtesy and kindness first usually will be rewarded with it in return regardless if the exhibitor wins or not!

Bad-mannered behavior is not just directed towards exhibitors either. I have a Judge friend who after completing a group judging assignment was leaving the ring when they were nastily accosted by the next Group judge for taking too much time and causing them delay. Now I was there to witness my friend's Group judging and at no point did they dawdle, their judging was punctual and confident. Frankly, we both were taken aback with this encounter.

As I walk around the show grounds I politely smile at all people, whether they are exhibitors, spectators, judges or handlers, but I can assure you the act is not reciprocal. Try your own experiment some day when you attend your next show. When you walk around attempt to make eye contact with people, then smile at them. Notice how many people avoid eye contact as they quickly glance away when someone is looking at them, seemingly as if they need to behave rudely in order to fit in. Try to register how many stone cold stares you receive, register how many pleasant smiles you get back in return. Do not try to chat with professional handlers or assistants nor attempt to touch their dogs but simply watch quietly as they groom and then when possible smile at them when they notice you. Register what reactions you get. How many glare and turn their backs or ignore you completely? We all have had many pleasant and horrid experiences while at shows -- I must say that one of my most unpleasant involved a handler. And this professional handler was grooming my dog, not showing it! It left me with such a bad taste that I will always remember it. Sadly, it seems there are an untold number of exhibitors with similar experiences nowadays all having that bitter sensation. Does it really surprise you that we are sometimes referred to as elitists? That this is an exclusionary sport? Again, the question is put forth. Is there any wonder why old and newcomers are leaving this sport?

Especially if a seasoned exhibitor can feel dread at the thought of having to attend another dog show to experience what can only

be described as masochistic behavior. Yes, masochistic behavior: seeming to like and invite misery by entering shows. More people than not now are simply opting out. They are fed up; they moved on and with them go their precious financial contributions.

STAND OUT DOGS BEING SHOWN THE RING EXIT

In so many of the breeds nowadays the best dog that truly depicts that particular breed's essence, its correct shape, or type looks like an alien compared to the competitors. So many of the breeds have experienced metamorphoses-- they have devolved. As the best dog stands out amongst its competitors the animal is regarded as atypical, certainly not in cadence with the other entrants and more often than not is shown the exit.

So the best dog does not win and some people say, "So what, that's dog shows for you." Unfortunately today, more often than not, people have these resigned attitudes-- however this is not a harmless development taking place. It is actually detrimental to the breeds. To quote author, Katie Gammill, AKC Judge and published author in her excellent piece "Why a Stand out Dog can be a Loser" states, 'the best dog you'll ever breed may be the hardest dog you will ever finish.'¹

It is a sad state of affairs when you have an entry that depicts the essence of the breed and looks like it came down from another planet as compared to its competition. There are many more non-conforming examples of breeds being shown than there are correct representations. A friend who is a judge describes it as "selecting the best of the similar." This is happening now at such an alarming rate that numerous breeds are being affected and when you have an experienced breeder who does not show frequently, they walk in the ring and are almost perceived to have another breed entirely. Many people tell me they simply will not even watch ringside due to enormous frustration. One person's thoughts were, "Well, the breeds have evolved and this is why most dogs no longer resemble what they used to be!" Now if that isn't dog show fodder, I don't know what is. This statement is classic for justifying the restyling of the breed to depict what is winning in the ring today. We see it in various degrees from understated but observable changes, to blatant, stark changes in breeds. For example let us look at the TRAD trend. You remember tremendous reach and drive. Now tell me what true hunting, herding, guard, and gun dog, while actually performing its function on a daily basis, would have such exaggerated movement and sustain without breaking down?

Bear in mind, without breed shape, without the essence of that breed you have nothing typical. Yes, we can have countless dogs that have correct front and rear assemblies. Yes, we have countless dogs that have been bred to have that incorrect but highly prized, "tremendous reach and drive" (TRAD.) These things do not fulfill any breed standard's merits. In many of these cases I have said,



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"Take a black & white photo of some of the breeds of dogs, cut off the heads and then ask as many dog people as possible what kind of dog it is supposed to be." You'd be surprised at some of the answers.

I could go on and on discussing the degeneration of type, of shape, loss of breed essence but I won't. Sometimes I fear that it may be too late unless something positively drastic happens. We cannot legislate morality but we must find a way to instill respectability back into the adjudicating process. On that note, where did the old-fashioned show of respect for the breeds go? Far too many times now breeds are used as stepping stones to move on to acquire group status. There appears to be no emphasis on the breed standard relying instead on the old adage, "I know a good dog when I see it." It seems that many judges feel they already know enough about the breed and do not need to know anymore. How many already approved judges, and or long established judges have you seen as spectators at your breeds' regional or national specialties or attending your Judge's Education programs or Seminars? If not, then "why not?" What's wrong with keeping oneself familiarized with the breeds you are approved for, staying abreast of developments in that breed: good or bad?

I always find it a paradox when amongst the entries at an all-breed show; a dog(s) that has consistently placed or won its national and/or regional specialty classes is disregarded in the breed ring classes! To me this is irrational. And this paradox is not exclusive to the breed ring, it occurs during Group judging as well. I recall a breed specialty that was held in conjunction with an all-breed show. This breed specialty was well-attended, approximately 100 competing, of which the all-breed show had a total of 762 dogs present including the 100 specialty entries and this exceptional and rarely shown Specialty Best of Breed winner was not even looked at again after Group judging examination, never mind even placing in the Group ring. The dog was completely overlooked and dismissed from the ring! I was one of the competitors at this specialty who was defeated by this outstanding example of the breed and I along with many others was happy to have lost to this dog.

In most but not all cases I believe that a dog who has won a Specialty(s) under specialty breeder/judges has obvious merits. For such a dog to not even get looked at during group judging at an all-breed show is perplexing. The Group judge is supposed to be an expert in each of its breeds and therefore rates each exhibit in accordance to how closely it fulfills its breed standard. A dog who has won a specialty(s) by breed specialists is deemed not of sufficient quality by a non-specialist group judge? To me this is irreconcilable.

On occasion there appears to be an apparent disconnect between breeder specialists findings and multi-breed/group judges. It begs the following question: Does a relatively unknown spe-

cialty winner have any chance of placing or winning group at an all-breed show when competing against well-known, advertised and regularly shown exhibits? If so, then what percentage of success do you believe this dog has? If not, then why not?

Does the following scenario sound familiar to you or your friends? You are an experienced breeder who over the course of many years has consistently produced some very nice dogs. Currently, you have some lovely youngsters that you, your mentors and your contemporaries have all rated and are really excited about as they are beautifully sound and depict the breed's true essence. You need to get them to some shows and there are no breed specialties or matches available nor any all breed matches so you consider entering a few all-breed shows. But you worry and dread this for several reasons. Firstly, you are already experienced, too experienced in what is happening out there now at dog shows. It's simply a gamble if these lovely, typey youngsters have even a fair chance to get a second look compared to what is considered the norm now in your ring.

You contemplate your options. If they lose how does that look? You have seen many advertisements where the breeder/owner or handler boasts that their puppy has won back to back majors from the puppy classes, some even going BOB over Specials and have completed their championship points by such and such early age? Yes, you are savvy as to why many of these puppies have won but it still bothers you that your super quality youngsters have a better chance of losing then winning at an all-breed show. Asking yourself quietly how come your dog most likely will not have that published winning record. Yes, certainly many people enter their pups to get them socialized or for ring practice, but in today's economic market it can be a costly training session; best to be done at matches than point shows. Let's face it, we do not enter to lose but are competing to win. We are supposedly showing breeding stock, the winner is supposed to be considered the best to carry on the breed.

Off you go to the show, brimming with anticipation though knowing the odds are not in your favor, but hoping this time it will be different. You secretly hope the judge(s), will immediately recognize the enormous quality in your exhibits and award them accordingly. Perhaps this may be a judge who actively seeks out and is proud "to find" the next great dog. Note; there still exist a small percentage of judges who pride themselves on their ability "to find" the next shining star and can say they discovered that dog. If I am not mistaken, the late Annie Rogers Clark was one of these. Do you dare wish for BOB? Do you dare think that even a Group placement may be on the horizon? Oh no, you say, not Group because experienced exhibitors are already programmed and trained that heavily advertised dogs and/or regularly shown dogs place in or win groups sometimes.

Show time! There you stand in the ring with your beautifully behaved youngster who exemplifies the standard in shape, type,



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soundness, and the judge looks and points to the other exhibit(s). You are dumbfounded because the winning exhibit(s) are incorrect, atypical but you remain gracious and offer congratulations to the winner. The winning entry may be any or many of the following: too extreme, too short legged, too cobby, too long, unsound, poorly assembled, out of coat, having incorrect topline being sloped or flat and so on. The determination may have been made for any one of the reasons discussed earlier. It could have been class preference, or competing against a professional or the judge is not fluent in your standard but the most likely reason: yours is a "stand out" therefore looks like an alien and does not resemble the other entries. The same familiar scenario repeats the next day with yet another judge. Now, how does that feel? Tell me if that is not a deflating experience. A friend has remarked to me they just enter specialties now and do not bother with all-breed shows. Another stated they will take a long break from the all-breed circuit, a much needed hiatus.

Experienced breeder/exhibitors are forced to pick up the pieces in the dog show game, show after show, while paying an average \$30.00 per entry, per dog, per day. That adds up. It adds up to lots of money for a crap shoot. Most of us would not consider taking that same amount of money to a casino and put it down on a crap game every weekend but we do it at a dog show. Again and again, the question is asked, is there any wonder why old and newcomers are leaving this sport? They don't just stop showing but breeding and registering dogs as well. In the not so distant past, my husband and I were attending an all-breed show when we were approached by a pleasant gentleman who was admiring our dogs. He was waiting for his wife who was exhibiting in another breed that day and upon learning that each of our dogs acquired one (1) point in competition he stated how valuable 1 point can be by citing that after reviewing his expenditures, he accounted that on average a single AKC point cost \$375.00! This cost may be relative but we all have been there before when both majors and one (1) pointers were elusive.

Earlier I stated that some authors in support of the status quo claim that entries are still sizable across the country. Is it possible this is due to how long many new exhibitors and new breeders are in the "game?" I have heard it repeated that newcomers enter our sport and stay on average 5 years then leave, so perhaps there may be a constant stream of newcomers to replenish those who finish one or two dogs or breed a litter or two and then leave. Something of a vicious cycle I would say because this group generally is composed of two segments. The first segment is rare. These are eager novices, very much interested in learning, they have a mentor, and they are provided a good dog to begin with and to show. Their downright frustrating experiences mount

quickly, show after show, year after year in which they consistently lose at the all-breed dog show game. When they were breaking into the game they were quite upbeat, pleasant with everyone but soon they realized this can be an unfriendly, unwelcoming sport! Over the objections and appeals from their mentor to persevere, they finally throw in the towel saying "to heck with this. It's not worth it." What's more exasperating is that the mentors recognize that some of these novices have an "eye for a dog" and they may have great potential. But they're gone now and it is a loss to us all.

The second segment is the "instant know-it-alls," those that desire instant gratification. They want a winner right away and in many cases the breed standard is meaningless to them. They are chasing after the blue ribbons. This group causes great harm and affects a breed's quality and welfare very quickly. These people typically cycle through fairly quickly because the betterment of a breed requires blood, sweat and tears. It can be back breaking work and to some can become "old" very fast so they leave. As is always the case though the long time experienced breeders are affected the most as they are the backbones of the sport and again are left to pick up the pieces after the newbie's move on, that is if the "old timers" still have the stomach for it.

ASKING THE TOUGH, CONTROVERSIAL QUESTIONS

I dare ask the question, what is the true value of the title Champion? Does it seem that any dog can be finished if enough money is thrown at it? Do you honestly believe that all champions are truly good or great dogs? How many times have you watched ringside while watching breed judging and shaken your head at the quality of breed specials? Have you ever wondered how on earth a dog like that even finished their championship title, let alone now is being specialed? Even more a revealing topic you'll find discussed in many breeds is the Top Ten list. Ask yourself if you consider the Top Ten ranked dogs in your breed as being great dogs or the best throughout your breed in today's competition? How many of you have perused your breed's Top Ten List and wondered how that mediocre dog could be rated and ranked as one of the top ten of your breed?

Perhaps the honest answer is that our sport requires reevaluation and rehabilitation. The interrelationship between exhibitor and judges is at a low point and I would say that overall, pure bred dog competitive events are not what they used to be.

¹as published in www.thedogplace

