



The More The Merrier

by Lisa Dubé Forman

We should all be aware now that the American Kennel Club (AKC) has launched a new performance event and opened participation of companionship events to registered purebred, Foundation Stock Service (FSS), Purebred Alternative Listing (PAL), and AKC Canine Partner dogs. In plain speak, the events are open to all dogs, mixed breed or not, as long as they are registered/listed with AKC.

Here is a brief explanation of the Canine Partners Program. This program allows for mixed breed dog owners to list their dogs with AKC. These dogs then can participate in AKC Companion events which are Agility, Obedience and Rally. The AKC states that clubs may choose to allow mixed breed participation at any AKC Agility, Obedience or Rally event. Mixed breeds will compete in the same classes and earn the same titles as their purebred counterparts. This differs slightly than the new performance event called a Coursing Ability Test. This is a stand-alone event and the mixed breed dogs do not run with their purebred dog counterparts.

I delighted in seeing the number of all-breed clubs throwing open their doors to the public and mixed breeds as I was searching the AKC website events calendar. I saw breed specialty clubs such as Lhasa Apso, Border Terrier, Papillon and Afghan Hound clubs holding obedience, rally and agility events extending the opportunity to mixed breeds to compete. This is terrific. I'd love to be a fly on the wall at the Papillon and Lhasa events watching the 12 to 18 lb. darlings in a sit-stay next to a 100 lb. mixed breed! I know these dramatic size differences are not new for seasoned obedience exhibitors, however, videos of such could

go viral on the Internet.

For some of you who may not be familiar with the Coursing Ability Test, the AKC describes it as an introductory event fashioned after the sport of lure coursing and is meant to be a fun, healthy activity for dogs and their owners. The Coursing Ability Tests may be held by all licensed lure coursing clubs. The specifics are that eligible dogs must be at least 12 months of age and individually registered/listed with the AKC (registered purebred, Foundation Stock Service (FSS), Purebred Alternative Listing (PAL) or AKC Canine Partner). In order to pass the test, a dog running alone must pursue a lure, completing the course with enthusiasm and without interruption within a given time. The event may be either a stand-alone test or may be held at the conclusion of a club's Lure Coursing event. In either case the Coursing Ability Test must be applied for as a separate event. If a club is concerned entries may be more than can be accommodated, the club may state a numeric limit in the premium. It would be a pleasant problem to have too many participants and too much money.

All of these are positive, progressive steps heading in the right direction. I believe these all-inclusive events are excellent public relations marketing tools which promise great fun and good revenue. Insofar as revenue, the AKC has cited that 2010 agility entries increased over the previous year by 9% and are nearing the one million mark. This is just the beginning due in part, large or small, to AKC permitting Canine Partner enrollees participation in companion events since April 2010. This is significant since the AKC has reported in the March 2011 delegates meeting minutes that conformation entries on the whole are declining. I will

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not digress here but I will repeat my theory that this decline may be a causal effect from what I have termed in my earlier articles as a “motivational crisis” amongst conformation exhibitors.

In the March 2011 delegates meeting minutes, AKC Chairman Menaker reported that the 2011 AKC National Agility Championships boasted a record breaking 1,136 entries including these Canine Partner listed dogs. I also read in the minutes a mention of our first mixed-breed AKC Master Agility Champion. The dog is five years old and the title was achieved by a first time dog owner. How impressive!

This is a sensational public relations sound bite. I hope an astute employee at AKC recognizes this and proposes a plan to publicize it. This can be an inspirational achievement for many dog owners of pure or mixed breeds that have existed beyond our sphere of influence. We can reach these people by promoting the news whether it is television ads, newspaper ads, or public service messages. At the risk of sounding

cynical though, when it involves our publicity-shy organization, it is almost a given the American dog-owning public will never know of this mixed breed triumph. If the roles were reversed, I wager the Animal Rights Activists (ARA) would be exploiting the news throughout the country. Then again, the ARA has been crowned the marketing geniuses.

Paradoxically now on public relations, the AKC jargon is that the communication’s department has had more than 700 million media impressions establishing the largest outreach in our history. The AKC further states independent consultants report this public relations effort as a \$10 million advertising value to AKC. The AKC also reports they have hired a new marketing team, though this new team is tasked with making up the shortfall in revenue from registrations which has had a negative, trickle-down effect on sales of pedigrees, subscriptions and royalties. I am not sure what classifies a “media impression” but I do not have to conduct a poll to inquire which is more memorable: ASPCA, HSUS, SPCA, PETA sponsored campaigns or our AKC “media impressions.” On that note, don’t all the acronyms just blend? If we are confused, can you imagine how mistaken the American public must be when they cannot differentiate us from them?

The AKC doesn’t appear to grasp the importance of today’s media madness. The new programs are terrific and will have a positive upshot with mixed breed dog owners looking for a rewarding and fun pastime, but where is the publicity? There are millions of mixed breed owners who have no knowledge of these events. How does the public find out about the events if they do not belong to an obedience club--word of mouth? If we continue the status quo we will not survive unless we prioritize. And when I say

“we”, I mean we people who still actively breed and exhibit multiple purebred dogs.

We all know acquaintances and mentors over the years that no longer breed or own dogs. Many enjoyed illustrious careers in purebred dogs and have now retired from their calling. Some judge regularly and there are others who simply have one or two remnant purebred companions still at home. They no longer breed due to their health or age, exorbitant costs, and the exhaustive work it entails besides having “did that, done that” all of which we understand. A few of these have quietly commented that the battle against

the Animal Rights Activists (ARA) is not urgently important to them. It is not an assailing issue on or in their lives. These people no longer participate in the breeding, running and showing of purebred dogs. While some are still deeply connected with the dog showing community, some more than others, the reality is legislative issues do not affect their lives and home. I even know of one or two active breeders with multiple dogs

that, when the time comes, will be out of dogs and into horses right away as if it were a seamless transition for them.

Today’s reputable, conscientious breeders and exhibitors live in the midst of widespread anti-breeder sentiments with the threat of discriminating, prohibitory dog legislation. Those who do not actively breed and exhibit do not have to live with a nearly overwhelming apprehension that, if these oppressive legislations are passed, they may have to choose between their much-loved intact females and re-home the remainder. That is if they can locate several suitable loving, lifelong homes. They will not have to endure the heartbreak of having to place all their young, promising dogs that represent decades of their blood, sweat and tears to comply with tyrannical new regulations as our lifelong passion is legislated into oblivion. Those who no longer actively breed and exhibit do not have to experience the heart-wrenching fear of or the trauma of an animal control officer (I am using this term very loosely as in some municipalities any person is qualified to be appointed the title) knocking on their door and possibly having their kennel of dogs seized due to trumped up charges or unsubstantiated complaints from an embittered neighbor.

Those who no longer actively breed and exhibit do not have to suffer the sickening worry, if their dogs were suddenly seized, as to their dogs welfare while under a stranger’s care and all the “what ifs”. Will the dogs be split up amongst several facilities? What if the facilities are an hour or more distant? Will the breeder be allowed to visit with the dogs multiple times daily? Will the authorities allow the breeder to supply the dog’s typical dietary foods while the breeder’s attorneys are battling against this out-



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rage? If the breeder is not allowed to provide the dog's customary food and visits, what type of food is provided? What about the cleanliness of the shelter and the enormous stress on the dogs? What if the dogs have been raised on only natural foods such as raw meats and vegetables and this shelter or dog pound provides the least expensive kibble. What about the concern over bloat or chronic diarrhea from sudden dietary changes? What about the financial aspect of having to pay a retainer and the lawyer fees to regain possession of the dogs? What about the fees imposed by the town while the dogs are in "their care"? Welcome to our world, this is our hell.

Therefore, it is only natural to wonder if the Directors of our organization have the same priorities as us. Are they as heavily invested as the people on the front lines are in the battle against the ARA? It may be too surreal for them as some of the leadership no longer has to fear the very real threats and consequences active breeders and exhibitors will face if we were to lose our battle. I wonder if this is why we have not seen progressive, aggressive public relations and influential media presence. Instead, we have observed years of the leaderships inward focus on shortfalls in revenue from losses in registrations and declining conformation entries. We were informed of AKC proposed programs, and overtures to high-volume breeders and/or commercial breeders, pet store schemes to maximize or widen the pool of AKC registered dogs to increase revenues. All the while, the anti-breeder and anti-dog campaigns grew, they festered and our opponent's message was massaged with public sentiments turning against us. A popular legend comes to mind, "Nero fiddled while Rome burned". Now, not only is the AKC still suffering from decreased registrations, the activists have made great strides in poisoning the waters for reputable, concerned purebred dog breeders. But we can still fight back using our successes from our new programs with a media presence.

The open participation events throw open our antique, creaky doors of exclusiveness. It is a gesture of welcome inclusiveness for all American dogs. How very appropriate for the AKC, the dog's champion, finally to come out of the dark ages and begin the baby steps of creating a new persona. I believe the revenue with the crucial mixed breed involvement will continue to grow as it is just catching on. More importantly though, beyond the fun and income, the rule change creates a crucial, priceless alliance, and a vital line of communication between us and our mixed-breed owner compatriots.

The Coursing Ability Tests are also going to be an ex-

citing opportunity for all dogs and their owners. This new coursing test is not only going to attract fellow purebred dog enthusiasts who may be bored or disheartened with the conformation aspect of our sport but mixed breed owners as well. What fun for all the dogs and, to boot, for the people. Did you happen to catch that wonderful photograph of the Dachshund in full tilt—in suspended gait—in the March 2011 *AKC Gazette*? You cannot help but smile because that Doxie was having a blast! Even dog owners will feel exhilarated when they see their dogs having fun and will want to repeat the experience. This is another way for us to connect with the average American, mixed-breed dog owner and it allows these owners to connect with their dogs. Many of our friends and neighbors who own mixed breeds may not have had any interest in obedience or agility because of the time and dedication to training these events require.

With this new event though, it

is more doable—more user-friendly. You can't ask for better public relations than that. Whether it be an open-door companion event or Coursing Ability Test, they all are the foundation for forming a bond with the dog owning public in which the Animal Rights Activists will suffer as long as we play our cards right.

I have had recent chats with exhibitors at dog shows and some are not well-informed about details of the new programs. The AKC needs to reach out and contact all purebred dog owners and exhibitors to inform them of substantial rule changes and new programs. Introducing such in the *AKC Gazette* in an era of declining subscriptions or dependence on people to sign up for AKC e-news weekly is limiting and not proactive. For instance, I know many exhibitors who do not subscribe to the *AKC Gazette* and even some who do but do not get around to reading the magazine. Get some banners up at the dog shows announcing new programs with all the new literature on strategically located tables that is within easy reach as people walk by. We need to invest in and have a media presence to entice and encourage new players to join us.

Originally, after reading the rule change last year that states, "clubs may choose to allow mixed breed participation at any AKC Agility, Obedience or Rally event" I felt concern over "may choose". I was and am an advocate and I felt this was a vanguard decision to have positive diverse results. I was worried that clubs would choose not to be inclusive as I had heard negative comments from dog show people. I argued that this was a much needed and long-overdue step in the right direction and a win-win situation all-around. Our sport, its' participants and the AKC must be

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inclusive to survive on several fronts. My theory is that responsible mixed-breed owners may establish precious kinships with us. They may strike up new friendships at our events and even fall head over heels in love with a particular purebred. The new participants may decide to get a purebred the next time around whereas this might never have happened if not for the open-door policy in the companion and performance events. The AKC wins by increasing revenues through registration/listing and entry fees. The AKC also obtains new contacts to communicate their email legislation alerts. As a result, these same people, who in the past were looking in through our figurative window, will feel threatened by the actions of the ARA and they will join forces with our coalitions in fighting the extremists. We need more friends and fewer enemies and we need to make the most of these relationships. The more the merrier or, as the adage goes, there is strength in numbers.

I along with countless others firmly believe that in order not to prosper but to survive, the AKC needs to reinvent itself. The AKC is governed according to old protocols. As so many of my esteemed colleagues have written, the AKC requires a new perspective. The AKC Board formed the “Imagining the Future of AKC” Committee that is a blend of board members and staff to review the needs of the sport and the AKC in the future. Disbelievably, I cannot help comment. This is a committee of status quo members. How are they supposed to give themselves a makeover when they do not understand nor acknowledge the problems? I liken this to a housewife who has been out of the workforce for a long time and decides to re-enter the business workforce again. She is unsuccessful because she does not realize she is in need of a makeover. We can see it but she can’t. Upon reflection she realizes or is given the advice that she needs a remake and attempts to do it herself without seeking any outside guidance. Not surprisingly, she fails because she doesn’t know how to go about doing it correctly as she doesn’t recognize her weaknesses or shortcomings.

Such a committee is crucial but only if properly staffed. We need a committee comprised of people outside the AKC inner sanctum and employment. We require a committee of young and old, active, experienced breeder/exhibitor fanciers and Delegates. Our future needs input and acumen from people in the trenches who breed, exhibit and run dogs and are fully immersed in the dog show game to envision the reinvention of the AKC, to make it relevant today. Such a committee would be parallel to “The Standing Rule on Delegate Committees.” Eloquently defined as goals to pro-

vide the broad-based independent involvement of the Delegates in matters affecting the dog fancy, and to identify and utilize the expertise within the Delegate Body and within the fancy. This is why we require a dog fancier committee to imagine our future. The reinvention of the AKC affects all the dog fancy and, basically, the AKC cannot exist without the dog fancy. Conversely, the dog fancy can exist without the AKC as demonstrated by various other registries borne and thriving. By its own admission in 2006, the AKC recognized other registries were affecting its registration revenue when they introduced the ill-conceived Petland store program designed to encourage the stores to differentiate AKC registration from the myriad of other for-profit registries.

Even so, if such a dog fanciers committee were implemented, would such committee findings and advice have influence or carry authority in bringing about the significantly needed changes? Perhaps I sound pessimistic but I am not naïve. The realism is that the AKC can circle their wagons around all their pots of gold and investments which appear aptly managed because it really is not our money. “Ours” being an attributive adjective referring to all us purebred dog fanciers and members of AKC-licensed or member clubs. That money is not ours to spend and we, as a collective, sans being an AKC Board member, do not have influence over how it is spent as cited in Article X, AKC Charter & Bylaws. For the most part Delegates spend their own hard-earned money to attend the meetings and are a devoted lot who care deeply about our breeds and our sport. In matters affecting the dog fancy though, does the dog fancy have influence over its’ future?

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