

## An Ugly Truth - Dog Show Politics



I showed dogs back when I was a kid as a 'junior handler' and now, many years later, as an 'owner-handler' and have always been aware of the so-called politics at dog shows. As a youngster, I didn't care about ring politics. All I wanted to do was to take a dog into a show ring and compete. As an adult, I do care about ring politics and the impact to the sport. It's not a new phenomenon, but it does seem to be escalating and making a critical impact to the sport of showing dogs.

It is my understanding that the American Kennel Club has been experiencing diminishing entries in conformation dog shows in the last few years. Of course, part of this is due to the economy and fewer discretionary dollars being available to be spent on hobbies. But, I think a bigger part of the problem comes from frustrated owner-handlers who are fed up spending hard-earned dollars going to shows full-well knowing that they will not have a chance to earn any points because some or all judges assigned to their breed that weekend are considered to be 'handler judges', aka crooks. Yes, that's harsh, but if you know that you don't have a chance to win under this type of judge even though you may be correctly exhibiting a well-trained, beautifully groomed, superior representative of your dog's breed standard, you have the right to anger and frustration. In an ideal world, it shouldn't matter who is showing the dog that wins as long as that particular dog is the best

representative of it's breed on that day against the competition present.

I must hasten to say that there are many judges who diligently seek out the best representative of the breed they are judging on that day based on the breed standard and they do so without bias against owner-handlers. They do not give the win to a professional handler just because that handler is a friend, or because that handler can be influential in getting them more judging assignments and so on. These are the judges that actually do their best to learn the breed standards and love their job. It's a joy to sit ringside and watch them judge dogs. They actually give the exhibitor a moment to stack their dog for examination, look at that dog, and perform an appropriate hands on examination no matter who is exhibiting the dog. You will also see this type of judge actually watch the dog move around the ring rather than gaze into other rings or up into space.

One of the lame excuses I've heard for handler bias is that judges often give wins to handlers over better quality owner handled dogs due to the fact that the handlers make a living showing dogs and they need to win regularly to keep their clients happy. This may be true; however, it's not a good excuse. Maybe these sympathetic judges need to suggest to these handlers that they should only take clients that offer them dogs that meet standard! Many handlers would be rolling on the floor laughing after reading this. Their reaction would be understandable as it is difficult to find enough decent dogs to take to shows to make it financially worthwhile for that handler to stay on the road. The more accomplished handlers do work hard at training and grooming (some would say over grooming) the dogs and at presenting them perfectly in the ring to give them every opportunity to be given the judge's nod. But, even THEY shouldn't win over a better quality dog that is properly presented by an owner-handler. No one should win with a mediocre dog if there's a better one in the ring.

We know that no dog is perfect. Every dog, when compared to it's breed standard has anywhere from a minor imperfection in

structure to pretty bad faults. You'd think that the dogs with the worst faults would automatically be eliminated from competition, but not always. The fault might be as simple as the dog is over or under the standard for height. This does not necessarily stop a motivated owner who has sufficient disposable income to hire a well-known handler in order to proceed with a national campaign. The goal is to win at enough shows to acquire enough breed and all-breed points in an attempt to be within the top twenty or higher for that breed or group. This does not happen without the nod from the judges of course. And, if the dog is lacking, the handler must find shows and judges who will look favorably on that handler's dog. Makes perfect logic to me. You go to who will give you the win, whether you have the best dog that day or not!

And, as important as being shown regularly is the need for the owners/backers to launch massive advertising campaigns. There are multiple 'all-breed' and specialty magazines that sell full page color ads for the purpose of providing publicity for the dog/handler. It's a way to pr wins, and more importantly, it is a way to keep that dog in judges' minds. These magazines, as well as magazines produced by breed clubs, are provided to all AKC judges.

Campaigning a dog is big business. There is a lot of money in the sport at this level. The cost of campaigning a top winning dog is in the six-figure category. Just remember, there are dogs that reach these levels because they are simply beautiful, have a top handler and have sufficient financial backers to get them there. AND, there are dogs that are there thanks to a top handler, possible cosmetic 'adjustments', very influential backers along with that very necessary political pull.

No sport is pure. The same statements made here can be made about most subjectively judged competitions. However, do we want the sport of showing dogs to implode on itself because it is losing the backbone that holds it together? The judges, handlers and financial backers are not the backbone of this sport. The backbone of this wonderful sport is first the breeder who

conscientiously tries to produce healthy, quality dogs. And, then the owner-handler who spends the time and money training their dog(s), paying entry fees, traveling to dog shows in order to participate in a sport that they love with the animals they love. Isn't that what it's really all about? If we wish to see dog shows and clubs survive, we need to look closely at the decisions that are being made within the show rings. And, we need to speak out.