

Learning the Dog Show Ropes

Judges' advice on dog shows, from start to finishing.

Sue Jeffries

Ever wonder what goes through the mind of a judge as he or she goes over dogs in the ring? Have you ever wanted to sit down and have a private conversation with a respected judge to gain more insight into what you can do to be successful?

Here, in my final column on Learning the Ropes, we have valuable words of wisdom from three well-known judges to help as you continue your journey in the sport.

All-breed judge Michele Billings, of Ft. Lauderdale, Fla., is one of the most revered people in the fancy. She's in very high demand and judges nearly every weekend.

We have so many new people in this sport today, she says. Its growing by leaps and bounds. We get so much media coverage now, that many new people are getting interested in showing dogs. But the reality is, very few dogs are as beautiful and as perfectly trained as they are on TV.

Billings cautions against falling in love with a breed before doing adequate research. Go to the library or the American Kennel Club website and read about the breed you like before buying one, she urges. A Rottweiler is not for everybody, and before you buy an Afghan Hound, know what you're in for to keep it groomed! If you want a Sporting breed or a Border Collie, think about what the dog was bred for. Make sure you can give it the proper exercise and keep it busy. Otherwise, it'll be destructive!

Once you decide on the right breed, Billings stresses the importance of buying from a responsible breeder. I don't know of any reputable breeder who makes money breeding dogs, she says. Its very costly to go through all the testing and care to produce good dogs, and buyers should be aware of that, whether they're purchasing a pet or a show-quality dog.

Like other judges, Billings has encountered dogs in the ring that are not show quality. When we see dogs that are not sound or lack merit and breed type, we as judges have a responsibility to withhold ribbons, when warranted, and take the time to talk to the exhibitor. My standard question is, Did you purchase this dog as a show-quality dog? Nine times out of 10, the person will answer no. Then I ask, Did you buy from a breeder? and next, Did you buy this dog from a pet store or over the Internet? At that point, she gives the following advice. Do your homework on the breed, stay home from a dozen more shows, and save your money to purchase a show-quality dog.