

All Roads Lead to Westminster

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If you breed and show dogs, MSG does not make you think of a flavor enhancer in Chinese food. It stands for one thing only, Madison Square Garden, the destination of dog fanciers the world over in February. This year marks the 133rd year of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, but bookending the Monday-and-Tuesday, nationally televised show (Feb. 9 and 10) are awards dinners, seminars, specialty shows, and private parties to keep people busy for an entire week.

The mass exodus begins the middle of next week. Several posh, private parties are held on Thursday evening, Feb. 5. On Friday, Feb. 6, I will be attending breed seminars hosted by the Dog Judges' Association of America (DJAA). A dear friend who also happens to write for *Dogs in Review* and *Dog World*, Dawne Deeley, will be giving the presentation on the newly recognized Norwegian Buhund, so I will be there to offer moral support ... and maybe even wrangle a dog or two.

In years past, I have attended the Progressive Dog Club's Toy Group specialty on Friday, held across the street from Madison Square Garden at the Hotel Pennsylvania. Some years I've handled dogs; other years I've reported on the show. I always see great dogs, visit with old friends, and have a fun time.

Saturday the 7th offers an embarrassment of riches. There is another full day of DJAA breed seminars at the Garden; breed specialties at the Hotel Pennsylvania, the New Yorker Hotel, and many more at the Meadowlands just over the bridge in New Jersey. I will be rehearsing at the Grand Hyatt Hotel for our Purina ProPlan Show Dogs of the Year Awards that evening, which honors the top dogs of the year, along with awards for best trainer, veterinarian, groomer, shelter, professional handler, owner-handler, breeder, show, and judge. A ballroom full of VIPs in full regalia just seems more exciting in a Manhattan setting.

On Sunday the 8th you can attend a bountiful brunch amidst a setting of dog art; an awards luncheon at legendary Sardi's hosted by the Alliance of Purebred Dog Writers; the Dog Writers' Association of America awards dinner at the Affinia Hotel – I'll be at both of those, since our magazines and books are nominees in various categories – and, sandwiched between the two awards functions, an always elegant open house at the AKC. What a treat to scan the bookshelves and admire the vast art collection while meeting AKC officials, nibbling on hors d'oeuvres, sipping wine, and listening to musicians playing classical music.

Monday and Tuesday mornings, exhibitors make their way to the Garden, pushing a caravan of crates and dollies, often through slushy puddles and against a brutal headwind. There are lots of reporters on the street corner, eager to talk to the owners of the unusual breeds who have converged on the Big Apple in the dead of winter.

I will join the long procession of reporters braving the bitterly cold temperatures to get to the press room, check in, don our badges, and take to the floor. I've been going through this routine for 30 years, and yet standing still, listening to the playing of the National Anthem, looking down at the carpeted rings from up above, never fails to give me goose bumps. I'm a diehard and don't want to miss my 8 a.m. breeds being judged so I plan to wolf down my bagel and coffee while it's still dark outside.

And so begin two long days – and nights – of watching expected dogs win, a few unexpected ones causing upsets, doing interviews, elbowing through the crowds, and filing stories for this very website.

Finally, on Wednesday the 12th, the Metropolitan Dog Club will be hosting a brunch where the Group judges along with Sari Brewster Tietjen, the Best in Show judge, will discuss their choices, and the Best in Show dog will dine on a hard-won steak. And then we masochists will think about scrambling for taxis to take us to the airports for our respective flights home.

For everyone there is a favorite ritual during this extraordinary week. I think mine is talking to cab drivers and crusty waitresses who see my nose stuck in the Westminster catalog and never fail to ask, "So, ya think the Poodle is going to take it this year, or maybe the Affenpinscher?" In what is arguably the most sophisticated city in the nation, everyone becomes a dog fanatic at Westminster time and speculates about this and that dog's chances. I don't hear cab drivers in L.A. speculate about Meryl Streep's and Sean Penn's chances for an Oscar during Academy Awards week. But

Westminster fever is infectious ... and the whole town will be going to the dogs ... but in a good way!

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