

## Dog Shows: The Great Equalizer

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One of the things I appreciate most about showing dogs is that it might just be the only sport that allows professionals and amateurs to compete in the same arena, on a level playing field. Think about it; as talented a tennis player or golfer as you might be, you won't be putting your skills to the test against the Williams sisters or Tiger Woods.

In the context of conformation showing, "professional" means a handler who derives his or her income from exhibiting dogs for clients, much like jockeys in the horse-racing world. "Amateur" is certainly not intended as a slight, since I have seen many extraordinarily successful owner-handlers show their own dogs all over the country. It simply means that as an owner-handler, you have some other nine-to-five job and so show your own dogs purely as a weekend hobby.

Many professional handlers will also tell you that as an owner-handler, you actually have an advantage over the pros, since you have only one dog to focus on, groom and keep in condition. You need to be on top of your game to compete on equal footing, but that's what handling classes are for. I have taught many such classes over the years, and can attest to the fact that even the klutziest owners can polish their performance with determination and practice. I compare it to dancing. At first, you think everyone on the dance floor is watching your two left feet stumble. In time, you realize that every other dancer is concentrating on their own performance and not paying the least bit of attention to your moves.

I find it equally fascinating to discover what the dog-showing people we see each weekend do in their "other lives." I know judges who create jewelry, teach university English, write books, perform surgery, practice law or fly airplanes. My owner-handler friends have equally eclectic lives. The bond we all share is our passion for showing dogs.

If you start attending dog shows, don't be surprised by the occasional celebrity sighting.

Recently, I spent a wonderful weekend at an Arizona dog show with Toni Tennille, of "The Captain and Tennille" musical fame. Toni owns Australian Shepherds these days, graciously sang the National Anthem at the start of the show, and at the end of each day helped us break down our crates, exercise dogs and load our vans. Actor and comic Bill Cosby has partnered with Captain Jean Heath for many years to produce 10 successive generations of Best in Show Lakeland Terriers. Actor William Shatner used to breed and show Doberman Pinschers. Singers Amy Grant and Vince Gill are currently enjoying the fun of co-owning a top-winning Welsh Springer Spaniel.

One of my favorite "celebrity" stories happened at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club dog show in New York City a few years ago. A magnificent white Standard Poodle named "Mikimoto" won in a hotly contested breed entry, and he and his handler were absolutely mobbed by well-wishers when they exited the ring. The brilliant actress Lauren Bacall was at the show and attempting to make her way through the crowds. "Excuse me, excuse me!" she roared in that unmistakably husky voice of hers, but she was ignored by the throngs of Mikimoto fans. He was the star of the show that morning and Miss Bacall simply had to wait until all of Miki's fans had taken their photos before they cleared a path for her. A unique experience for Lauren Bacall, I am sure!

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