

Is Your Parent Club Inclusive or Divisive?

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In the past few weeks, the Portuguese Water Dog Club of America probably came under as much scrutiny as the Obamas' new puppy did. Not surprisingly, the PWDCA handled the public exposure with aplomb, welcoming the first family to the ranks of new PWD owners, offering advice on the breed and encouraging others to proceed with caution and do their research before committing to this breed, or any other.

It would have been easy for the club to get flustered by all the media attention and fly into panic mode. Wisely, the club didn't go there. Their message was that the breed is special but intelligent prospective owners who have done their homework deserve a well-bred puppy and the collective mentoring and support of the parent club.

Over the years, I have had the opportunity to evaluate the PWDCA's bulletin, "The Courier," as a judge for the Dog Writers Association of America writing competition, and work with the club executive when Dog World magazine produced a profile on the breed during my tenure as Editor-in-Chief of that publication. In each situation, I found the members gracious, cooperative, professional and always focused on getting the facts right.

Sadly, this is not always the case among parent clubs. We've had instances when executive officers don't communicate in a timely fashion yet are quick to rap our knuckles when they happen to disagree with those breed authorities who have been professional enough to work with our writers who are trying to meet a deadline.

Although one would assume that executive officers of a club have documented experience in their breed and have paid their dues in the whelping box and the show ring, that isn't always the case. We have our share of dilettantes who have never bred a litter or handled a dog in the show ring. They feel threatened by differences of opinion and respond in a defensive manner to those who assume joining a parent club is the right way to seek education.

Voting on a club constitution or proposed changes to a breed standard are weighty subjects beyond the scope of novices. However, an associate membership would allow newcomers to benefit from the educational offerings of the club while getting to know the breed as well as breeder-exhibitors. More experienced members can also take new members under their wing at meetings and specialty shows, encouraging them to volunteer their writing skills, computer knowledge and other talents to benefit the club.

The graying of the dog-exhibiting population is a frequent subject of conversation when dog fanciers get together. Many of us have not had children, and those who have often find their kids grow up and have no desire whatsoever to breed and show dogs. Where will the new generation of dog fanciers come from? It's important that national parent clubs, as well as regional specialty clubs and all-breed clubs, become inclusive, welcome newcomers to the sport, make dog shows understandable and fun to spectators, and increase our visibility within the community.

I take my hat off to the Portuguese Water Dog Club of America for displaying grace under pressure and serving as a great role model for parent clubs everywhere.

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