

## Lost Opportunities

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SEPTEMBER 16, 2009, 2:00 P.M. EDT

When reading old dog magazines or talking to veteran breeders, handlers and judges, you will often hear references to “benched shows” and the educational opportunities they offered exhibitors.

A few decades ago, all shows were benched, meaning you and your dog were required to remain at a show all day, whether you won or lost. Even if you felt you should have won, it’s difficult to stay annoyed at someone you are neighbors with for upwards of eight hours.

So during the course of the day, exhibitors exchanged grooming tips, shared lunch, and discussed the great dogs of the past, many of which were merely names on paper for the novices. The advice gleaned by the newcomers, thanks to the generosity of dedicated old breeders, was worth its weight in gold.

Benched shows allowed spectators to learn about the breeds as well, since all the dogs had to stay at the show.

Today, only a handful of benched shows remain: Westminster, the Eastern Dog Club (Boston), the Kennel Club of Philadelphia, and the Golden Gate Kennel Club in San Francisco. At all others, exhibitors are free to leave as soon as their breed judging is completed. Sadly, many pack up their gear and vacate the premises after their class is done, without even waiting to see who takes the Breed, much less remaining for Group judging.

There is so much knowledge to be gained by sitting at ringside, watching talented handlers show a variety of breeds at their best, and chatting with knowledgeable exhibitors. For the most part, it is the exhibitors who came up through the ranks of the benched shows who understand the benefits of staying at a show beyond the judging of your own dog. Ironically, it is the exhibitors who could benefit most from such ringside tutorials who are the least inclined to stay.

This past weekend, a friend of mine who is considered among the world’s authorities in his rare breed, having invested more than three decades in its development, attended a four-show circuit in a neighboring state. He and his handler had four dogs of varying ages – including a Westminster Group placement winner – with them. His only competition was an exhibitor with her first dog of this breed.

What an opportunity to have this knowledgeable breeder-judge assess her own dog and explain the pros and cons of his dogs; the issues facing the breed today; and so on. This same breeder had hosted three different sets of European fanciers this summer who had each spent a considerable chunk of change to visit California and see the many dogs in his kennel first-hand, observing generation after generation.

What an unparalleled learning experience. Many others throughout the country and the world must settle for e-mailing him to pick his brains and learn about the breed they love. Yet here was an exhibitor who was so self-absorbed in her own single dog that she lacked the imagination and curiosity to learn from a mentor sitting a mere few feet away.

Our sport is full of instant experts. Part of your challenge as a newcomer is to separate the know-it-alls from the genuine authorities, and then take advantage of any and all opportunities to learn from them. Failing to do so is a heartbreaking, lost opportunity.

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