

'Meet the Breeds' a Resounding Success

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The American Kennel Club's inaugural, stand-alone "Meet the Breeds" event, held October 17-18 at New York City's Jacob Javits Center, was a huge success in every way imaginable. The AKC partnered with the Cat Fanciers' Association to host 36,000 people over two days. Nearly 200 dog clubs and cat councils participated, along with more than 100 vendors and 16 sponsors.

Parent clubs and local specialty clubs sent representatives to host the breed booths and perform in the demo rings. Dog-loving celebrities who attended the event included Whoopi Goldberg, Mario Lopez, fashion designer Michael Kors and newspaper gossip columnist Cindy Adams who took her two dogs to meet the crowds at the Yorkshire Terrier Club of America booth.

The event was modeled on The Kennel Club's "Discover Dogs" in England. Since Meet the Breeds has been a consistent draw each year for the public and the media at the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship, AKC president Dennis Sprung was confident a stand-alone event in a large urban venue was in order. He expanded the concept to include the CFA.

If anyone had doubts the public would show interest in a dog event in New York that wasn't Westminster, those apprehensions vanished at the sight of crowds waiting eagerly to get in when the doors opened on Saturday at 10 a.m. A whopping 6,000 advance tickets had been sold.

It is clear that consumers relish the opportunity to get up close and personal with purebred dogs (and cats) and their dedicated breeders. While Westminster is a benched show that allows the public to view all entered dogs all day long for two whole days, the hectic environment of an internationally televised dog show means that exhibitors are stressed out and dogs are frequently not on their benches but being groomed for the ring.

By comparison, this event allowed breeders to chill out and discuss the care of their dogs without worrying about a missed ring time. Although I was exhibiting at a dog show in Northern California that weekend, I spoke by phone to several breeder-friends who were staffing their breed booths at the Javits. With their dogs on hand to meet and greet the crowds and lots of literature to distribute, they were amazed at the foot traffic both days and the public's unflagging excitement.

The unqualified success of Meet the Breeds makes a compelling case for kennel clubs offering similar displays at their local dog shows. Club volunteers can give tours of the show, explain the judging procedure and discuss the benefits (breed predictability, health guarantees, free expert advice) of purchasing a purebred. The animal rights extremists whose goal is to discredit our sport sound less convincing when the public has positive encounters with friendly, knowledgeable breeders and happy, well-socialized dogs.

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