

New Format for AKC/Eukanuba National Championship

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I have attended all eight AKC/Eukanuba National Championships, both in California and in Florida. All have been invitational events, a huge honor extended to those dogs, breeders, owners and handlers privileged to take part. This year, there is a change in format which brings with it added excitement.

In celebration of the American Kennel Club's 125th anniversary, the 2009 conformation show this weekend will be an open event, allowing non-champion dogs of both sexes to compete for points toward their titles. The best male and best female will then show against the champions for Best of Breed and the opportunity to compete in Group judging.

What proud owner wouldn't want to win championship points at this prestigious event? It's a unique opportunity since the show will return to its invitational format in 2010.

In many breeds, there will be foreign dogs competing. That's because of the popular Eukanuba World Challenge, an exciting international competition now in its third year that will feature the top dogs from 41 countries vying for \$15,000 in prize money.

The pageantry of last year's event – with flag-bearers and dignitaries accompanying the dogs and handlers into the big center ring under spotlight – gave me goose bumps. However, many of the foreign dogs are entered in regular breed competition as well.

Last week, I judged Best Puppy in Show at one of the pre-AKC/Eukanuba shows and saw Sweden's current No. 1 dog all breeds, a Saluki, win Best of Breed and go on to take a first in the Hound Group, so the international competitors have arrived. Just to prove that the world is a much smaller place these days, it's worth noting that this same Saluki that reigns supreme in Sweden was bred in Southern California.

In addition to conformation, the AKC National Agility Invitational and the AKC National Obedience Invitational are also taking place under the same roof – the Long Beach Convention Center. That makes for nearly 5,000 dogs competing for more than \$225,000 in cash prizes.

One of the most popular offerings this weekend is AKC Meet the Breeds, with more than 150 breeds showcased by their national clubs in festively decorated booths. While the show dogs have been groomed to perfection, the breed booths are staffed by club volunteers who have brought dogs ready for spectator petting. If you are considering adding a dog to your family, there is no substitute for meeting the breeds on your short list in person, and learning about them from knowledgeable long-time owners.

For heart-wrenching emotion, you can't do better than the AKC Humane Fund Awards for Canine Excellence, or the ACE awards. Each year, dogs are recognized for their outstanding contributions to their respective communities. Five categories are acknowledged: Law Enforcement, Search and Rescue, Therapy, Service and Exemplary Companion.

These honorees and their proud owners will be on hand in Long Beach to receive their awards and be recognized by the appreciative audience. It is our pleasure to rise to our feet and give these heroes the respectful standing ovation they so richly deserve.

There truly is something for everyone here. While the weekend weather forecast threatens rain, it will not dampen the spirits of the participants, the dogs or the spectators who make it to Long Beach.

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