

## Public Education at Dog Shows

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It's December and mere days away from the eighth annual AKC/Eukanuba National Championship in Long Beach, Calif. I've had non-doggie friends mention the show to me because they've seen the colorful banners hanging along major streets. This is one well-publicized event, and because it's held downtown in the convention center of a large city anyone with a bus token can take part in the excitement. This is not the case with most dog shows held in the boonies. We all enter and exhibit our dogs, but there isn't much of a spectator gate. Most urbanites don't feel like schlepping out to the county fairgrounds to smell cow manure and fight for a parking spot.

One of my favorite features at the National Championship is the Meet the Breeds booths. The AKC invites all national breed clubs (parent clubs) to take advantage of this opportunity to tell one and all what makes their breed special. The booths are lavishly decorated, with club members dressing up in native garb and volunteering to bring their dogs for the public to meet. There's nothing quite like chatting to Saluki fanciers who are dressed as Bedouins or Scottie lovers covered in kilts to make you feel that you are a part of living history. Since many of the club volunteers are not exhibiting their dogs in conformation, they have the time to relax, answer questions, and show off the dogs and breeds they are so proud of.

Educational opportunities are unparalleled. The booths feature breed videos to watch, scrapbooks to thumb through, and handouts to take home. Best of all are the live demo dogs to cuddle!

While we love our sport dearly, we in the conformation world agree that dog shows are not particularly spectator-friendly. It isn't always easy for the rookie to figure out how dog shows work. And exhibitors brushing, blow-drying, and fussing with their dogs to get them ready for the ring don't have time for chatting.

Few venues have the space to allow for club booths in every breed, but I think it's imperative that all show-giving clubs have a few non-showing members on hand who can give short tours of the show to interested spectators; explain the fundamentals of Breed, Group, and Best-in-Show judging; have a few unusual breeds available for photo ops; and make the experience an informative and enjoyable one for the public.

The militants within the animal-rights movement are quick to paint all breeders with the same brush, and discredit hobby breeders as snobs and elitists who participate in beauty contests and don't care about the health of our breeds.

What better way to correct the public's misperceptions than at the grass-roots level, with demos at local dog shows throughout the country?

Inviting a few local politicians or TV personalities to present trophies, and having a sweet, sloppy Rottweiler or one of the maligned bully breeds ready to pose for pictures with visiting children, is a far more compelling PR tool than exchanging public barbs with fanatics.

We need to attract new people to the sport as well as refute the allegations that have been hurled at us by those with a not-so-private agenda. Showing the public who we are – proud hobby breeders and exhibitors -- strikes me as an effective way to address both those goals.

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