

The Exercise of Judging

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Given the subjective nature of showing dogs, it's clear to see why judges make an easy target. No one likes admitting their dog was out of condition, having an off day, not showing at its best or displaying a fault that simply could not be overlooked. It's so much simpler to accuse the judge of having an agenda, not knowing the nuances of your breed, favoring a professional handler or rewarding a well-connected breeder who can line up a future judging assignment.

While even novice exhibitors can spot a dog that's cow-hocked or limping, the goal is not fault judging. You may end up with a dog that has the least number of faults but is also the flattest, least exciting dog in the ring. Since the perfect dog has yet to be created, and all dogs have flaws, a good judge looks for the dog that wears them well, making the most of its virtues.

It's one thing to evaluate a litter of puppies but quite another to evaluate dogs belonging to friends and acquaintances in your breed. Not everyone is cut out to be a judge. Some people hate making those decisions and disappointing exhibitors. You can see those types of judges moving a class of dogs around the ring endlessly. The exhibitors end up not caring whose dog gets first place, they just want the judge to point to someone.

No amount of ringside critiquing can prepare you for the experience of getting inside the ring, putting your hands on dogs and evaluating them while the clock is ticking. Believe it or not, it's easy judging a class of excellent dogs and much tougher judging a class of mediocre dogs. Sometimes it comes down to asking yourself which dog you dislike least. You want to be encouraging to exhibitors but not give them false hope. Showing dogs is an expensive hobby and it's always more fun to win than to lose.

When I judge, I don't want to give a first-place blue ribbon to a dog of lesser quality. In such cases, I will give even a single entry a second-place ribbon because I don't want to send home a new exhibitor empty-handed. However, I will gently explain that in my opinion, the dog is not of the quality that merits a first-place ribbon. I recommend the owner take their dog home, spay or neuter it, and apply the money they'll be saving on entry fees toward purchasing a better-quality, more competitive dog. In the long run, this plan will be more economical and years faster than attempting to produce a better dog from your mediocre bitch.

As you get further and further involved in conformation, a club may invite you to judge a fun match or sweepstakes. Take advantage of the opportunity and see how you like the experience. Some people love the discipline required; others become indecisive and second-guess themselves. However the day goes, consider it a great education. Whatever the outcome, you will probably end up with greater respect for the judges most exhibitors take for granted.

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