Westminster Sends a Great Message to Dog Lovers

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Best in Show winner "Stump"
Photo by Mary BloomThe Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show took place two weeks ago and I am still thrilled by the results. Not only was the show exciting and historic, but I think it sent a most timely message to viewers.

It's not easy to make history at an event 133 years old, so when you're there to witness it live, that's a great feeling.

It was wonderful to have the Dogue de Bordeaux shown at the Garden for the first time and welcomed so warmly by the crowds. Kudos to the owners and handlers of the 15 DDBs who were determined to get to New York and present their new champions to the world.

In the Working Group ring on Tuesday night, "Midas" the gold Tibetan Mastiff received thunderous applause and when he was honored by judge Paula Nykiel with a Group Fourth, that, too, was very special. His sire "Barnes" had won Best of Breed at Westminster in 2008, the first year that the TM was eligible to compete. To have his very deserving son win Best of Breed and place in the Group this year was a huge validation of his quality and the strength of his pedigree. His breeder and co-owner Richard Eichhorn had flown up from California to see Midas compete and couldn't have been prouder.

In the Sporting Group, 10-year-old "Stump," the Sussex Spaniel, came out of retirement to not only win the Group – a feat he had accomplished in 2004 – but then steal the entire show under judge Sari Brewster Tietjen's discerning eye. Stump is the first of his very rare breed to go Best in Show at Westminster as well as the oldest dog of any breed to do so. Way to go, Stump!

The Sussex was in glorious condition, gaiting around the big ring with a topline so level he could have balanced a glass of water on it and not spilled a drop. A friend of mine was among those sharing a hotel elevator at 2 a.m. with Stump and his handler, and tells me Stump worked the elevator as joyfully as he had worked the show three hours before. At a judges' luncheon on Wednesday, Stump was his jovial self and posed with many dozens of reporters and well-wishers who requested a photo of themselves with him.

Stump's co-owner Cecilia Ruggles and breeder Doug Johnson were jubilant. Stump was simply having a good time. And here's where the timely message comes in.

These have been difficult months for the dog-breeder community. Militant lobbyists who oppose the breeding and showing of dogs are, in fact, offended at the very notion of pet ownership. To advance their zero-pet agenda, they perpetuate a myth that dog breeders are callous elitists who consider their dogs status symbols, depriving them of a quality of life. Stump and his loving owners, breeders, and handler put that mean-spirited stereotype to rest at Westminster. The truth is that retired show dogs are cherished at home by their devoted owners. Those that come out of retirement years later, like Stump, never lose the spring in their step nor their love of the limelight.

Whether Stump's victory inspires an owner to adopt a senior dog, or merely inspires a smile, it did our hearts good to see a charismatic dog return to a magical show and claim top prize.

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