

Where Have All the Matches Gone?

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With our economy in a downturn and dog fanciers looking for resourceful ways to enjoy our sport in a more frugal way, where have our sanction matches and fun matches gone? I've always considered these "practice shows" not only a great training ground for new owner-handlers, inexperienced dogs and aspiring judges but one of the biggest bargains in conformation.

When I see new owners enter their unschooled puppies in a championship point show at 25 bucks a pop, only to drag them around the ring for the 2½ minutes the judge has been allotted to assess each entry, I cringe. The cardinal rule with puppies is making the experience fun. I don't think creating sparks as a puppy's bottom gets tugged along a cold concrete floor or rubber mat qualifies!

No doubt warm-weather states such as California, Arizona and Florida are fortunate in that parks and other outdoor venues are accessible to us year-round. But when I lived back East, we used hockey arenas, church basements, college campuses and armories to hold matches that drew big crowds on chilly winter days. Club members prepared sandwiches, soup, brownies and coffee, staffed the canteen and made a few bucks for the club at the end of the day

We even approached shopping malls, particularly those that contained a pet superstore, and they were so thrilled to have us as their "live weekend entertainment" that we were seldom refused and they charged us peanuts, if anything at all. Given the terrible press that hobby breeders and purebred dogs in general are subjected to these days, wouldn't it be wonderful to have the opportunity to network with the public and let them meet firsthand well-socialized, well-bred dogs and dedicated, knowledgeable breeders?

Owners could enter on the day of the match and for \$10 you and your dog got great experience as did the breeders who did the judging. Instead of a stressful 2½ minutes per dog because an AKC point show must run on schedule, match judges are able to spend time with tentative puppies on the examining table and on the ground, offering suggestions to novice exhibitors and building everyone's confidence. This is where you can try different kinds of show leads, different kinds of bait, free stacking versus hard stacking, and get feedback from experienced exhibitors on what works best for you and what doesn't.

With benched shows being few and far between, matches are a great place for dog people and the dog-loving public to hang out for the day, talk dogs, do some PR and learn dog-show protocol. Looking back over several decades, some of my closest friends in dogs are fellow club members I bonded with at matches, or couples who approached me about my breed, subsequently visited my home, purchased a puppy from me to learn on, and eventually went on to finish their dogs' championships themselves.

Sure, some dogs have the coordination and confidence to win points and titles as babies but most go through those gangly, unattractive stages when they simply aren't competitive. Save your bucks to spend on entries when your dog is ready to show, and on the ads you'll want to take out to show the world what you've accomplished.

In the meantime, join your local kennel club, meet like-minded people in your community and volunteer to work on a match.

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