

Deciphering Dog Show Classes

The American Kennel Club has several classes in which to compete depending on your dog's age and experience.

By Allan Reznik

Q. I was wondering where I can find a listing of dog shows to attend throughout the year? Also, I was wondering how you know what to enter your dog under show wise?

A. Each issue of "The AKC Gazette & Events Calendar" lists all shows and trials throughout the country for several months. You can subscribe to receive either a hard-copy or online version of the magazine.

Dog-show superintendents also list their shows on their websites, along with online entry forms, judges' panels, and all other pertinent details.

As for what class to choose when you fill out your entry form, your dog will be eligible for some classes and not for others, so that eliminates a bit of the guesswork.

If your dog is a puppy, the logical class to enter would be either 6-9 Months or 9-12 Months. Some shows also offer a 12-18 Month class. If your puppy acts a bit silly, the judge will know he's a puppy, indulge him somewhat and try to make the show a pleasant experience for him. The 12-18 Month class is useful because in many breeds, a puppy just beyond a year of age is pretty gangly and uncoordinated, and won't be competitive against older, more mature dogs. Again, this class tells the judge your dog is an adolescent, and in most cases probably still a puppy mentally.

The Bred-by-Exhibitor class means exactly what it says: the person who takes the dog into the ring must also have bred the dog and be its owner or at least a co-owner.

If you and your dog are still newbies in the world of conformation shows but your dog was born in the U.S., then the American-Bred class is a good bet for you.

In most breeds, you will encounter the stiffest competition in the Open class: mature dogs in full adult coat, champions from other foreign countries vying for an American title, and many dogs shown by professional handlers. If you think your dog is up to it, go for it!

Judges should judge all dogs on the day, which means that if the best specimen of the breed happens to be the 9-month-old puppy, then the puppy should take Winners Dog or Winners Bitch along with the accompanying points toward its championship. There are some judges who have a history of typically awarding points only to the winners of the Open class, but thankfully, for many more judges, the class from which the best dog emerges is irrelevant. A quality dog is rewarded.

The final class is called Best of Breed, for dogs that have already completed their championships. (And champion dogs are termed "Specials.")

For an owner new to the sport, please invest in some handling classes to familiarize yourself and your dog with show-ring protocol. Also attend a few shows without your dog simply to observe and become more comfortable.