

## Westminster's Winning Breeds

### How much does breed matter in winning the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show?

*Deborah Wood*

A friend of mine asked me what seemed like a simple question: "With all the popularity of toy dogs right now, do you think one of them is more likely to win Westminster this year?"

I gave what I thought was a simple answer: No. After all, if breed popularity had anything to do with who wins Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, Labrador Retrievers would have won for the last 18 years. Yet in that time, the closest the breed has come is 4th place in the Sporting Group back in 2003.

The more I thought about her question, though, the more I began to rethink my answer. Breed popularity has nothing to do with who wins Best in Show, but that doesn't mean that every breed has an equal shot at the title. The truth is that some breeds are far more likely to win at Westminster than others.

Consider this: In the last 50 years, a dog from the Terrier Group has won Best in Show at Westminster a whopping 14 times. A Poodle of one size or another has won six times, and four English Springer Spaniels have captured the prize, one of them winning the show twice.

Why the lopsided results? In this show, more than any other, showmanship counts. When it comes to pizzazz, not all breeds are equal.

In normal dog show competition, the judge's primary concern is how well the dog conforms to his breed standard. At Westminster, the seven dogs who have won their groups aren't ordinary dogs – they aren't even ordinary show dogs. These nearly perfect specimens of their breeds more than conform to their standards – they are among the best that have ever walked the planet.

So how does the judge decide among seven perfect dogs? Flash can make a difference.

The dog with an incredible coat and glitzy appearance has an edge. Dogs with fabulous fur, such as Poodles, Afghan Hounds, or English Springer Spaniels, stand out. So do dogs with big, exciting movement, such as German Shorthaired Pointers and Doberman Pinschers. The magnificent size and dignity of a Newfoundland captures the judge's eye. All these breeds have won at Westminster multiple times.

The very reasons that Labrador Retrievers make such great family pets – they are easy-going, moderate in their size and shape, and have easy-care coats – make them likely also-rans at Westminster.

Most often, the final decision comes down to personality. The Best in Show ring at Madison Square Garden is nothing like even these experienced show dogs have ever seen. The roaring crowd, the heat, the lights, the tension – it's overwhelming. Almost every year one dog rises to occasion. He mugs for the crowd. His tail wags with glee. He clearly loves the adrenaline that surrounds him. The judge will often say, "This dog asked for it" or "he couldn't be denied." Tough, independent, energetic terriers are the dogs most likely to embrace that kind of moment.

But you never know.

The winner of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show isn't a statistic. The winner is a dog with heart and soul, beauty and energy. Every breed has the potential to include a dog with that kind of greatness.

It all comes down to one judge, seven group winners, and a dog who reaches out and embraces the most tension-filled moment in dogdom. The answer comes when the Best in Show judge gives the purple and gold ribbon to a dog who will make history.

Deborah Wood is the former pet columnist for The Oregonian newspaper and the author of 11 books. Her book "Top Dogs: Making It to Westminster" chronicles the winning of the Westminster Kennel Club dog show in 2000. She lives in Oregon with her four Papillons.



- Read more about Westminster -