

Where Does a Dog Go After Best in Show?

Find out what former Westminster Best in Show winners are up to now.

Eve Adamson

Is there life after Westminster, or does a dog peak at that very moment the judge bestows Best in Show upon one special winner at the crème de la crème of dog shows? A win at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show may be big. Life-changing, even. But the last four dogs to take that coveted title are doing pretty well these days living like regular pets ... pets with really big trophies, that is. Take a peek into the private lives of Josh, Carlee, Rufus, and James, and see just what they've been up to since they won their famous titles.

2004 Winner: Josh, Newfoundland

Josh won the audience's heart at the 2004 Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show when he let out a big, bellowing "Woof" right in the middle of Madison Square Garden. Now happily retired and living with his owners, David and Peggy Helming, in New Jersey, the 8-year-old Newfoundland still travels occasionally and works as a therapy dog with senior citizens when time permits, but spends most of his days as personal greeter in the Helming home.

Josh likes to hang with his best friend, a Portuguese Water Dog named Katie, chasing deer out of the yard and chasing each other. "They both get a lot of exercise on deer patrol," Helming says. "He's a very happy dog. He still gets these crazy puppy moments, chasing squeaky toys or greeting the UPS man."

This February, the Helmings watched the final night of the Westminster show on television, with Josh at their feet. "They kept showing flashbacks of Josh. It was funny to see him on the floor, then look up and see him on the TV," Helming says. Did Josh notice? "Occasionally, a dog would bark on the TV and he would look up and roll his eyes," Helming says. We know, Josh. Been there, done that.

2005 Winner: Carlee, German Shorthaired Pointer

When the judge pointed to Carlee, naming her Best in Show at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in 2005, Linda Stark fell out of her chair. "I couldn't believe it. It really is the Superbowl of dogdom," says Stark, who owns the animated German Shorthaired Pointer with her husband Dick. For the next few months, Carlee reveled in a whirlwind of personal appearances, including an introduction on the floor during a Denver Nuggets basketball game (the team presented Carlee with an extra-large "Carlee #1" T-shirt signed by the whole team) and a visit to the Colorado Governor's office. "Carlee was on the floor of the Senate. They voted it "Carlee Day," Stark says. "For awhile there, she really needed a publicist."

Two years later, Carlee's schedule has slowed a bit, even though she's just as active and spirited as ever. The Westminster veteran spends her days in Colorado, in the Stark's Tuscan-style stone castle on 42 acres at 9,000 feet, surrounded by a national park. Carlee sleeps in the "people bed," runs and hikes in the woods with Stark, and romps with her best friend, a German Shepherd Dog named BeaBea. BeaBea barks at noises, and Carlee points. Just the other day, Stark saw the German Shepherd trying to point, too. Who wouldn't want to be just like Carlee?

2006 Winner: Rufus, Bull Terrier

Westminster or no Westminster, Rufus has always been a pet first, and a show dog second. Sure, he won the Westminster Kennel Club dog show in 2006, but Rufus has always lived at home where he's treated like a prince, acts like a clown, and likes to get his own way ... just like any Bull Terrier. Rufus has stayed busy earning his Canine Good Citizen certificate, working on his Rally title, completing his Therapy Dog International certification, and working with kids in reading programs. "The kids write stories about him and read to him. He'll dress up in a Dr. Seuss hat and visit a kindergarten tomorrow," says Barbara Bishop of the 7-year-old star, who lives in New Jersey with Bishop and her husband, Tom.

But Rufus has to make some sacrifices, too. "His favorite treat used to be Dunkin' Donuts Munchkins, but I've switched him to blueberry muffins because I'm trying to watch his weight. Now, come on, Rufus!" says Bishop, as she tries to coax her stubborn pup out of the car. "He won't budge. He wants to make sure I don't go anywhere without him. You see, he's very crafty and very spoiled, but he's the love of my life."

2007 Winner: James, English Springer Spaniel

James will do just about anything for his handler, Kellie Fitzgerald, and that includes winning the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in 2007. After his big win, James, Kellie, and their entourage swept through Manhattan to greet an adoring public, making appearances on "The Early Show," "Fox & Friends," "Good Morning America," the "Today Show," "Martha Stewart," and "Charlie Rose," not to mention a 15-city satellite media tour beginning at the world-famous Sardi's restaurant.

Now that he's a star, the gentle English Springer Spaniel will retire and move back to Virginia to be with his owners. "I'm really going to miss him," Fitzgerald says. "But he has a lot to offer the breed. He needs to pass on all his great qualities." Already a certified therapy dog, James will return to the other jobs he loves: Competitive obedience, working with Alzheimer's patients, and of course, valuable stud dog. For now, though, James is happy to bask in his celebrity. "We've got a lot of appearances to make," Fitzgerald says. "Then it's one more week together. And then he goes home."

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