

Winning Owner-Handlers in History

Notable owner-handlers have come from all walks of life to win big at Westminster.

By Amy Fernandez

For 132 years, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show has upheld its reputation as America's premier show. It attracted the world's finest dogs long before entries were restricted to champions in 1992. Handlers gear up a year in advance to face the challenges of top-level competition, midwinter travel to New York, unbelievable crowds, and the logistics of miniscule grooming and benching space.

Westminster is one of the few remaining benched dog shows. Dogs are on display all day. Despite the stress, when they step onto the green carpet they must give a perfect two-minute performance. Any imperfection or false move is broadcast worldwide thanks to streaming online video and televised coverage.

You'd think this was territory for professionals only. However, Westminster winners have been presented by owners from every walk of life — from financier J.P. Morgan, who dominated the Collie ring in the 1890s, to football legend Keith Carter, who piloted the first Rottweiler to a Group win in 2006.

Owner-handlers have won Westminster 30 times, beginning in 1907 when Winthrop Rutherford captured the first of three consecutive BIS wins with his Smooth Fox Terrier, Ch. Warren Remedy. This record stands today, but other owner-handlers have come close, including the following: In 1930 and 1931, John Bates won BIS with his Wire Fox Terrier Ch. Pendley Calling of Blarney. In 1935 the legendary Poodle owner-handler Sherman Hoyt became the first woman to win Westminster with Ch. Nunsoe Due de la Terrace of Blackeen. In 1940 and 1941, Herman Mellenthin won BIS with his black Cocker Spaniel, Ch. My Own Brucie. In 1957 Sunny Shay handled her homebred Afghan Hound, Ch. Shirkhan of Grandeur, to the first Westminster BIS for a hound. Owner-handler Patricia Craige Trotter holds the record for Westminster Group wins. Between 1970 and 1995 her Vin-Melca Norwegian Elkhounds won 10 Hound Group firsts.

Don't be deceived by these success stories. Westminster prep typically includes the tremendous mental, physical, and financial demands of an intensive show campaign. Because of their strong personal investment in the dog's career, owner-handlers also exact an emotional toll from each loss.

This is offset by the luxury of focused attention. Grooming, training, and conditioning routines create a dog-owner bond that usually translates into a consistently impressive ring performance.

Westminster wins of any caliber qualify as lifetime achievements. For owner-handlers, the satisfaction of doing it yourself is truly icing on the cake.

Amy Fernandez is a regular contributor to Dog World and Dogs in Review magazines.

To read more about owner-handlers who've competed at Westminster, check out the February 2009 issue of DOG FANCY.