

## Beagle Wins 132nd Westminster

### Why It's A Big Deal

*Bo Bengtson*

Sometimes people ask what makes Westminster such a big deal. After all, it's not a particularly big show: only 2,500 dogs are entered and considerably fewer actually compete. It's not even the biggest dog show in America and a far cry from the vast numbers at many overseas events. (Crufts, for instance, is more than 10 times the size of Westminster this year.) The rings are small, the breed entries seldom large and the judges more or less the same faces you've seen throughout the year at other shows. What's so special about that?

Anyone who doubts that Westminster is a great event ought to have been there the second Tuesday in February this year as Dr. J. Donald Jones went over the seven finalists in front of a vast and wildly partisan crowd at Madison Square Garden in New York City. It hit me then, as it does almost every year, that Westminster is unique because it transcends like no other event the confines of our small and sometimes rather insular dog show world. Sure, a lot of people were screaming their heads off as much for Snoopy as for any real appreciation of the true quality of the dog involved, but it feels great to know that the American public (and a lot of foreign visitors, too) are so passionate about dogs. It's not just the thousands of spectators at the show but the millions who watch on TV and the even greater number who hear about Westminster afterwards. The big newspapers and TV shows know what the public wants, and there would not be such an avalanche of coverage if people didn't love to watch, read and hear about dogs. (When a serious national publication like Newsweek, with a weekly circulation of over three million, prints three references to the BIS competition and two photos in the issue after the show — then you can be confident that dog shows can, indeed, be "real" news.) In the days following Westminster it seemed you couldn't turn around without seeing a picture of 'Uno' or hearing some reference to the show on the radio, at the bank or in the grocery store checkout line...

Exactly how Westminster has reached such an exalted status, and how this can be achieved by other shows, is something many would like to know. Not to be facetious, but I don't think there's a secret: you just keep going for 132 years and improve the show year by year. It doesn't hurt to have Madison Square Garden as a show venue: this is unquestionably one of the world's greatest locations for any sporting event. We take it for granted these days that Westminster should look glamorous, with the green carpet, purple ring dividers and great flower arrangements, but those of us who have been around for a while remember how dreary it all used to look a couple of decades ago. In fact, it is difficult to imagine what could be done to polish the show further. (Well, the backstage benching area is still a mess, although it seemed like switching some of the Groups to alternate days helped — even the rings looked bigger. There were far too many empty VIP seats on Monday night, and something about the floor cover was different, resonated and scared some of the dogs. But that's being really picky...)

You could argue, perhaps, that Westminster's sheer entertainment value to some extent negates the real purpose of a dog show, which is — still, to those of us who are seriously involved in this sport — about finding the best, most representative specimen of each breed: the proverbial "evaluation of breeding stock." The general public doesn't care much about that; a couple of dozen Vizslas all look pretty much the same to them, and it's unavoidable that Group and Best in Show judging is what the media focus on. But the thing that makes Westminster unique to me, and I'm sure to many others, is that here, at one single show, you get to see the best of the best in breed after breed, lined up side-by-side for comparison. It's not just the heavily campaigned all-breed winners but also exciting "insider" dogs that breed specialists rave about, and promising youngsters just starting their careers. Many of them will go on to greater fame and glory — one of the fun things at Westminster is to spot the new stars, to be able to say that we knew them back before they were famous. It's an axiom that it is almost as important to "look good" at Westminster as it is to win there, and many a new star's career has been launched by impressing the ringside judges at Westminster, if not necessarily the one officiating on the day.

The importance of looking good applies to the judges, too, and I'm not talking about the outfits (which are, on occasion, worthy of a chapter of their own). You may not see many new judges at Westminster, but being invited to officiate here is such an honor, and you do so in the full glare of the collected intelligentsia of America's (and sometimes the world's) dog fancy so that you would naturally try extra hard to do the best job you possibly can. Does the glare of publicity favor the big winners? Some say so, but I doubt it: if you are a Westminster judge surely you are confident enough to do exactly what you want, even if that means not putting up one of the top dogs. Of course, that's sometimes difficult, since most of the dogs at Westminster are great winners — we know they all have to be champions, but further than that, very few would go to the trouble of dragging a dog into Manhattan in February unless they thought it had a fair chance of winning something. This year we saw at least a few examples of the top awards not going to the expected winner; whether that's

a good or a bad thing I'll leave for you to decide.

There is rarely more than an occasional hand-picked foreign judge at Westminster. (The international participation at this show is something the club will no doubt pay more attention to in the future.) This year two of the judges were from Australia — the first time ever, I'm told, that this country has been represented on the panel. Of the two, Bob Curtis is an international all-rounder who has judged in the U.S. and almost everywhere else for several decades, while Guy Spagnolo is one of the world's greatest Labrador Retriever experts and provided what was, at least for this writer, one of the highlights of the show by going through an entry of 51 Labrador Retriever champions in the comfortable, easy-going yet conscientious manner which only a real breed specialist can do. This was easily the biggest breed entry of the show; other good figures came from German Shorthaired Pointers (40), Pugs (37), Cavalier King Charles Spaniels (35), Rhodesian Ridgebacks, French Bulldogs and Australian Shepherds (35 each), Borzoi and Chinese Cresteds (31 each), and Rottweilers and Havanese (30 each). Well over 100 breeds had entries in the double digits; not big figures in themselves but impressive when a dozen or so of the breed's top winners are lined up for inspection along two sides of the ring.

Five of the seven finalists were last year's top dog within that Group, and three of them won the Group at Westminster last year, too. All the Top 10 dogs of 2007 competed, and all except one won Best of Breed and all but three placed in the Group — although not always as high as expected. The biggest surprise came in the Herding Group, where Stanley Saltzman put up the Australian Shepherd Ch. Vinelake Collinswood Yablon. 'Deuce' is a 4-year-old bitch who won a couple of BIS in 2006 and was among the top winners of her breed that year; in 2007 she took time out for a litter and now put in a great performance with her young handler. (By the way, are the handlers getting younger or is it just me getting older? Probably both. Of course, I don't know the age of this year's Group-winning handlers, but I doubt their average age is much over 35, and excepting their current winners only one of them has won Group First at Westminster with another dog.)

By late Tuesday evening it was all over but the shouting, and there was more of that than I can recall ever in the past — at least not since Mike Zollo won with the Pointer, Ch. Marjetta's National Acclaim, in 1986. All the finalists looked stunning and all received their fair share of ringside support, but there's no question that the charismatic Uno — the 15-inch Beagle Ch. K-Run's Park Me In First — was a favorite both with the ringside spectators and with Dr. Jones. Uno is the first Beagle, the first scenthound and only the fourth Hound Group winner ever to take Best in Show at Westminster — in other words, both an historic win and a very well-deserved one.

#### Westminster: British Impressions

Dogs in Review asked a couple of British visitors, none of them first-time visitors but all more accustomed to Crufts, what their impressions of Westminster are. Here's what they said:

"It was our third visit to Westminster, an experience we always enjoy. It can't really be compared with Crufts due to size alone, although it has its own character and atmosphere. We are always impressed as to how well it is organized, with a strict timetable kept to. The only aspect which is always a little distressing is the benching area, or lack of it, and how so many dogs are kept in such small confines for so long. Having said that, every dog we saw shown seemed to be enjoying the experience. Many of our British exhibitors could take note on the handling and professionalism of the handlers."

"Undoubtedly, the first thing which strikes one about Westminster is the intimacy of the venue. Madison Square Garden is rather compact and this makes seeing all the action relatively easy. Also, if one gets tired walking around, there is plenty of seating in the stands, where one can get a fairly good view of the judging.

"The level of handling in the U.S. is second to none — no question of that — so Westminster is a real treat, as nowhere else can one see so many professional handlers of the highest rank under one roof. There's also something quite comforting about seeing some of the 'big names' one has admired over a great many years joining one in line to buy a hot dog at lunchtime — yes, these folk are normal dog people, too!

"The real class act at Westminster is the Group judging. The level of organisation and smooth stewarding and judging give an understatement to the proceedings which is characteristically and elegantly 'Westminster.' The way the crowd gets behind their favourites creates a unique atmosphere, one which leaves the spectators buzzing for hours after the show closes. The cheering just before Best in Show is announced is particularly thrilling and louder than at any other major dog show throughout the world.

"All this and the enormous playground that is New York City too. What's not to like?"

"Westminster Kennel Club dog show is the brash American cousin to our own Crufts (and I mean that in the most

affectionate way!). Westminster is a star-studded beauty pageant, a made-for-TV drama and a rock concert all in one, starring America's best purebred dogs and a level of presentation, grooming and passion seen nowhere else in the world. Going to the Garden can be as much about the social scene as the dog show and, indeed, many place more emphasis on the former! There are black-tie awards banquets for the breeders, owners and handlers of the previous year's top dogs, and there are private get-togethers put on by local dog people at their apartments and penthouses.

"Compared to the cavernous National Exhibition Centre (where Crufts is held), Madison Square Garden is more user-friendly in that it is possible to see every breed you want during the two days' breed judging. With fewer dogs in competition there are eight different rings simultaneously run throughout the day on the Garden floor. Spectators are often lined up six deep around the edges of the ring and are very vocal in their support for their favourite dogs and handlers. The atmosphere is fast-paced and buzzing with excitement, and the feeling is contagious, much like the energy in New York City itself. It is noisy in comparison to Crufts, where applause during breed judging is most often kept to a minimum and excesses are generally frowned upon.

"The scenery changes for each night's Group judging, much like that at Crufts. The main difference is the size of the crowd and the roar of the applause. Madison Square Garden is a sporting arena and seats sell out for Westminster. The crowd reaches a fever pitch as BIS approaches. Several newspapers covering the show highlighted the top contenders, including the eventual winner, the Beagle. As the little hound stepped on to the carpet Tuesday night you could have closed your eyes and imagined that a pop group had entered the building. I cannot imagine the same scene playing out at Crufts, but again the size of the crowd is many times greater and accounts for more volume. As the judge marked his book before awarding Best, fans in the crowd began to riot, shouting 'Beagle!' and 'Poodle!' and 'Vikki!' And then the finger pointed, the crowd again erupted and leapt to its feet, and the curtain closed on another spectacular episode of Westminster.

"If you have never been there I whole-heartedly encourage you to go and experience it for yourself. You will take away memories that will last a lifetime and might even take back some new friends for Crufts a few weeks later. You can't really compare the two when it comes right down to it. It is best to embrace them both and celebrate their differences."

—Michael Gadsby