

## Opening Space

### Focus on the Positives

Can you bear any more bad news? I don't know about you, but a lot of people who love dogs are concerned about the future these days, and frankly we are all sick of worrying... Wherever we turn there's bad news: spay and neuter restrictions keep popping up in one part of the country after another, regardless of the fact that they hurt those who are law-abiding and won't help those who need it. AKC registration figures keep dropping, not because purebred dogs are less popular but simply because AKC's market share of the total has shrunk. (Talk about getting what you wish for: once AKC cracked down on the puppy mills there obviously aren't enough of us left to help pay AKC's bills.) Show entries are falling to lows that are unprecedented within my memory, not because showing dogs is a less popular hobby than it used to be but because there are so many new shows that even the most enthusiastic exhibitors can't keep up. The average number of dogs competing at an AKC all-breed show is now 899, which — with 169 breeds and varieties recognized — means that the average breed entry is exactly 5.31 dogs — not a figure that can be considered meaningful competition.

You can find much more to be gloomy about without trying very hard. In fact, the situation for purebred dogs and the dog sport in general is now in such a precarious state that I wonder what the next few years will be like for those who are involved in dogs and dog shows in this country. There's no question that people love dogs as much as ever, if not more. The benefits of dog ownership for both physical and mental health are well established, millions watch dog shows on TV these days and the general knowledge and interest is so much greater than it ever was in the past. Remember when you had to explain to an uncomprehending audience what dog shows were about? Those days are over: the receptionist at my dentist told me she'd look for me on TV during Westminster (good luck!), and the lady at the post office was asking if it's true that CoCo would make a comeback at Madison Square Garden this year!

The great mystery is that since everyone loves dogs and dog shows so much, how come we don't get any respect? Why are we so beleaguered from every side? Why have we not been able to make this a better accepted and understood activity? If you can answer those questions I would love to hear from you.

OK, I was going to be upbeat this month... so at least for the moment, let me lay off the ills of the American dog sport and focus on the positives. Here are a few things to be proud of and pleased with:

We have the best-run dog shows in the world. Not that there aren't well-organized shows elsewhere, but when it comes to smooth, professional arrangements nothing can beat a typical American dog show.

We don't have the biggest shows, but we have the greatest one of its kind, and we are well on the way to adding a second one to the list. You can't compare Westminster with Crufts or the World Show because they are so different, but Westminster is a truly unique, world-class event — and it's exciting to watch the AKC/Eukanuba event developing its own profile and showing signs of real greatness.

There's nothing, absolutely nothing, in the world as wonderful for a dog fancier as the best American specialty shows. I don't care which breed you're interested in, if you love dog shows you must attend the Montgomery Terrier classic, the Poodle Club of America and some of the other biggest and best National Specialties at least once. They are true celebrations of their breeds — what dog shows were originally meant to be but so seldom are.

American breeders produce some fantastic dogs. Don't let the fact that the top two dogs of 2007 in the U.S. were imported fool you: if you scratch their pedigrees you will find almost all American breeding. The influence of American dogs in foreign countries is greater today in more breeds than it has ever been before.

Nowhere in the world are show dogs as well handled as they are in America. You don't realize this until you've judged abroad and tried to evaluate a dog whose handler has no idea how bring out the dog's qualities. There are many foreign handlers who are every bit as good as our best, but the general level is superior here.

I'm not much for flag-waving in general, and I love dog shows in other countries for their unique qualities, but in the present atmosphere of doom and gloom we need to take pride in the things we do right in this country.

### Pure Breed or Not?

Finally, I have to vent a little. This may concern just my breed right now, but in today's climate of "designer dogs" and indiscriminate breed approval, yours could be next. Whippet people are appalled to find that a "Longhaired Whippet" has been approved in some FCI-member countries in Europe, even though it's an established fact that these dogs are the result of an American breeder crossing Whippets with Shetland Sheepdogs. These dogs are not registerable in the U.S. and I thought, naively, that the reciprocal agreement between AKC and FCI would prohibit such recognition. That is not the



case, and if this “new breed” is approved for international competition we may eventually see it participate in the World Challenge at the AKC/Eukanuba show.

Meanwhile, let's TRY to have fun with our dogs...

Bo Bengtson, Editor-at-Large