

Dogs in Review May 2009 | Bo Bengtson At Large: An AKC for Mutts?

Top of the news this month must be AKC's decision to open up the club to mixed breeds. With the club's 125-year history as a backdrop, this is nothing short of revolutionary and will profoundly affect not just the club and its constituents (that's us, folks), but also how AKC and the sport of dogs are perceived by the general public. I have already heard the protests from the purists: it's the worst thing that could happen, it will ruin the sport, AKC is by definition for purebreds only, etc., etc. Yet anyone with half an eye open must have seen this coming, and once you get used to the idea, this one — like so many other at first "unthinkable" changes — may not be so bad at all. They have had mutts at Crufts for years and it certainly has not ruined the sport over there. I don't think it will do so here either.

The "mixed breeds program" won't directly affect regular breeders and exhibitors. Starting this fall AKC will begin to accept registrations of Mixed Breeds — officially they will "receive an AKC ID number," but it amounts to much the same thing, although presumably no details of parentage will be included. The enrolled dogs may then compete in agility, obedience and rally at "stand-alone" events (meaning those that are held independently, not with e.g. an AKC conformation show). The mixed-breed owners will later also be able to take advantage of various other benefits and services.

If it offends your refined sensibility to see a mongrel at an AKC dog show, don't worry: you won't have to, at least not yet. On second thought, though: get used to it. Most dog show exhibitors and hobby breeders love dogs regardless of breed, or mixture of breeds, and I don't see how opening up some AKC activities to all dogs, and letting more dog lovers into the fancy, is going to hurt the rest of us. There is strength in numbers, and anyway most of the mutt owners will want a purebred for their next dog, at least if we let them see how much fun we're having. (We are, aren't we?) So let's just calm down — it won't be as bad as a lot of people seem to expect.

MORE ON MUTTS VS. PUREBREDS

Speaking of purebreds, three breeds which have long been recognized by the FCI in the rest of the world can now compete at AKC shows as well: the Irish Red and White Setter, the Pyrenean Shepherd and the Norwegian Buhund. That means AKC now has 161 recognized breeds, less than half of FCI's total, although admittedly some of their 350-something "breeds" bring to mind the question of exactly what a breed is and isn't. Are all of them truly distinct from each other? Do we really need that many? There's no question, however, that some breeds which have enjoyed solid popularity in Europe for decades should be recognized here as well.

The new dog in the White House fits well into this month's theme of mutts vs. purebreds. Many expressed disappointment that the Obamas' long-awaited puppy proved to be a purebred Portuguese Water Dog and not a Mixed Breed from a shelter — but truth be told, the 6-month-old Amigo's New Hope ('Bo') was in fact re-homed by his breeders Art and Martha Stern in Texas after an older dog in his first home didn't approve of the newcomer.

As dog people we ought to be pleased that the First Family set a good example by putting a lot of thought and care into the choice of their first dog. Just how a lively young PWD will fit in at the White House remains to be seen, of course. The President has said that few state decisions attract as much attention as his family's choice of dog... so no doubt we'll be kept informed.

AKC/EUKANUBA MOVES TO FLORIDA

The build-up towards the AKC/Eukanuba show to be held in Long Beach, Calif., on Dec. 12-13 continues. It sounds like this could be the dog show party of the year: for the first time it's open to all dogs of all AKC-recognized breeds; AKC will celebrate its 125th anniversary at the same time; at least 23 parent clubs will hold specialties; and there's the World Challenge and all the other good stuff we've come to expect.

Having said that, it's a huge disappointment for us on the West Coast to find that this event will move back to Orlando, Fla., in 2011. I admit I'm not impartial: like a lot of others here in California I was thrilled that we finally had a great, big international event in this part of the world. After several years in Long Beach we've come to look forward to this as the year's highlight in the same way as New Yorkers look forward to Westminster.

It's sad, but let's not begrudge the Floridians their good luck in hosting the show. Instead, let's try to convince AKC that shows like this one — or at least a reasonable facsimile, even one without some of the glamour frills — is what the dog sport needs to survive. There can only be one AKC/Eukanuba, but that should not stop AKC from offering one big prestige show in each part of the country each year.



The fact is we're drowning in too many shows which are lacking in both ambition and real competition. The few clubs that try to put on a real event could use some help from AKC — so why not offer them official State Championship status, guarantee 5-point majors in every breed and add whatever extra frills that will help attract both entries and attention?

This country is too big to have so many little shows; in fact, it's so large it deserves at least one big, major, officially sanctioned AKC event in every part of it.