

Bo Bengtson At Large

A Showcase for Breeders

Once in a while somebody has an idea that's so good you smack yourself over the head and wonder why nobody thought of that before. Such was the case with the Breeder's Showcase, sponsored by Purina and hosted by Santa Barbara Kennel Club in California Aug. 29-30. For weeks beforehand dog people around the country could hardly stop talking about it, and the discussion has continued afterward. I'm not sure when I last heard of a new dog show feature generating such interest.

Not that highlighting the breeders is a new idea. Without good breeders this sport could not exist, and in recent years a lot has been done to encourage them: AKC's Breeder of the Year awards and the Dogs in Review "Winkie" for Outstanding Breeder come to mind. However, we have never had anything in this country to compare with the Breeders' Teams competitions that are such a popular feature overseas. It's an awesome sight to see perhaps a hundred of these teams — each consisting of four dogs bred by the same kennel — sweep into the ring for the Best Breeder competition at those shows. Why Westminster, AKC/Eukanuba or some other media-savvy show has not already introduced something similar is beyond me: in addition to everything else, it would be TV eye candy of the first order. Can you imagine how exciting the Best Breeder finale could be at Westminster? What a thrilling experience to watch and what an amazing honor to win!

However, it's Santa Barbara Kennel Club that gets credit for bringing this new-to-America concept to fruition. This is a club that could rest on its laurels as host to one of the greatest American dog shows of the 20th century. The fact that in recent years the show has lost both the old showground and the greater part of its entry should not be held against it. Any dog show that's held at the height of the summer season in a resort area as crowded and expensive as Santa Barbara is today just cannot hope to find all the space needed for a really large dog show, so instead of trying to get big again SBKC went all out to introduce something new. The response was terrific: a total of 181 Breeder's Showcase teams were entered. (The club was hoping for 100; I thought more than a couple of dozen might be too optimistic. Sometimes it's nice to be wrong.) It's obvious that the club tapped into a deeply felt need for recognition — a belief that, indeed, breeders deserve more credit than they usually get.

This first SBKC Breeder's Showcase differed in some ways from its foreign counterparts. For one thing, the number of dogs in each breeder's "team" was just two; for another, there was generous prize money to the top four teams in each Group, with four-figure sums to Best in Breeder's Showcase and Runner-Up.

(This might be a good time to decide that participants in this competition should be termed "teams" and not "groups," in order to avoid the tangled web of misunderstanding that ensues when we talk about "all the groups that competed in each Group," etc.)

This all relates to what we've written about in Dogs in Review many times before: that dog people are hungry for something new, different and interesting that makes us want to stay at the show instead of leaving as soon as breed judging is over. (See most recently Christi McDonald's "Sport of Exclusion" article in the August DR.)

So was everything wonderful? Of course not. It's inevitable that when anything new is introduced there will be glitches, but it's disappointing that so many dog people apparently won't give a wonderful new idea like this the benefit of the doubt.

Here, for the record, are some of the grievances:

Once a panel of judges has been published it should not be changed at the request of an exhibitor. This happened here. Huge mistake; I'm sure it won't occur again.

That exhibitor had a point, though: no judge should officiate for the same breeds both in the regular show and in the Breeder's Showcase. A unique panel for the latter is necessary.

The finalists should be announced immediately after the preliminary judging, so teams not considered for placement do not have to stay and return to the ring a second time.

All judging should conclude the same day it started: holding off the finale until the next night means you lose impetus.

There's only one judge for each of the semi-finals, so why have two judges for Best in Breeder's Showcase? (And what happens if they disagree?)

Reserve Best should be chosen from the winning teams already in the ring; expecting the 2nd placements in each Group to stand by is not realistic.

All this, however, is easily fixed. I can't wait to hear plans for the next Breeder's Showcase. Will the requirements be increased from two dogs to three — making it a bit harder for a breeder to qualify but even more meaningful to win? Will there be discussion about what's most important when judging the teams: the dogs' overall quality or how evenly matched they are? (Always a bone of contention at these competitions in Europe.)

I sincerely hope that as this type of judging becomes a regular part of American dog shows, our best breeders will have an opportunity to display their talent in a new way. Congratulations to Santa Barbara Kennel Club on a wonderful new initiative. It is many years since I was a member of this club, but it's good to know that the spirit of the old days is still alive and well. May other clubs offer as valuable and useful improvements to our sport as this one.

See also Paul Lepiane's show report elsewhere in this issue.