

Judging Dog Shows Overseas

An overseas judging assignment is both an honor and learning experience for dog-show judges.

Betty-Anne Stenmark

There is nothing like an assignment in a foreign country to give a judge an adrenaline rush. In America, we are somewhat insulated and generally think that how we do things is how everyone else in the world of dog shows does them or should do them. Although Canada and the United States are very similar in how dog shows are conducted, the rest of the world is not like us, and the road to a championship can be quite different. The classes are different, dogs are sometimes critiqued, and the language is often different.

In America and Canada, we are limited to judging 175 dogs a day. If it's an independently held specialty, that number is increased to 200 dogs. In Australia, 240 dogs are judged in a day, but the judge doesn't do the paperwork or hand out ribbons, making the process faster. Instead, a ring steward does all of that, and quickly ushers the dogs in and out of the ring, too. The first time I judged in Australia I told my delightful ring steward that I didn't know if I could judge 240 dogs in a day and if he noticed I was slowing down to please tell me. Mid-afternoon, as I stood looking at a class with my hands clasped behind me, he came up and put ribbons in my hands, then said, "Love, you need to speed it up!"

In Europe, where most countries are members of the FCI, the judging system is very different and judges seldom pass on more than 75 dogs in a day as it is a much more detailed process. First of all, each dog is individually evaluated and a verbal critique of the dog is dictated by the judge to a competent ring steward who is proficient in the language of the judge. The dogs are also graded; Excellent, Very Good, Good, and so on.

After each dog in that class has been critiqued and graded, they are then judged as a class, against each other, and placed first through fifth place. Quite harrowing for an American judge is the possibility of placing Dog A who has been awarded the grade of Very Good, higher than Dog B who was graded Excellent. In America, we judge by comparison and as most experienced judges will tell you, as the class is judged some dogs look better toward the end of the class judging than they did when they first walked into the ring. Just to keep you a little off balance, first place receives a red ribbon, and second place gets a blue, just the opposite of what happens in this country.

I often think the exhibitors who show in countries where they receive a written critique of their dog as they leave the ring are far better educated about dogs in general than the exhibitors in countries who don't receive critiques. For instance, if three different judges have written in their critique that your dog has a soft topline, then that exhibitor will know that their dog's topline is an issue. In this country, the novice exhibitor, unless mentored by someone knowledgeable, will have no clue that the reason his dog continually places out of the ribbons is probably because of its poor topline.

Writing critiques in this country can occur when judging a specialty, particularly a national specialty. Often the contract between the club and the judge includes a provision that the judge agrees to provide a written critique, and it is due to the club's newsletter editor by a certain date. Over the years I have enjoyed reading critiques written by breed specialists, and have picked up some detail that I might not otherwise have thought about.

You will sometimes see a judge standing in the middle of the ring with a voice recorder, dictating a detailed critique of each of the class winners, to be transcribed later. A well-written critique is helpful to readers in understanding where this judge places importance when evaluating their breed. Certainly the writing of a breed critique can be revealing and sometimes points up the judge's very obvious lack of knowledge about the breed! Of course not all judges are comfortable writing critiques, and while they may be very knowledgeable, they may not have proficient writing skills.

I like to judge overseas. I find it sharpens my mind and keeps me on my toes. For instance, I certainly didn't know before my visit to Finland a number of years ago just how different the continental Dachshund was as compared to the breed in America.

Another classic example of a breed that looks vastly different is the English Springer Spaniel in Great Britain as opposed to the same breed in America. American judges would be ill-advised to accept an invitation to judge Dachshunds or English Springer Spaniels overseas. Neither the exhibitor nor the judge would be happy with the experience! On the other hand, breeds such as Afghan Hounds, Salukis and Pembroke Welsh Corgis are similar worldwide.

Last summer I was privileged to judge two breeds with which I have a long history – Saint Bernards and Dandie Dinmont

Terriers – at the Windsor Championship show in England. It was a fascinating experience. The Saint Bernards surprised and delighted me, as they were not the English type I had expected. At the turn of the 20th century, England adopted a different standard from the country of origin, Switzerland, and the rest of the world. In recent years, the Saints there have become quite similar in type to the rest of the world. Gone are the extremely tall and freckle-faced dogs Great Britain was known for.

The Saints shown to me at Windsor would be competitive anywhere in the world today. Happily, the Dandies in England resembled the Dandies I've judged around the world in recent years, very much resembling those in New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Finland.

The judging process in England is quite different from what I'm accustomed to. All of the dogs are entered in the classes, so to speak, nonchampions and champions of record alike. To win a championship, a dog must win three Challenge Certificates, defeating all dogs of its sex, in order to "make up" (or complete) its title. It takes quite a good dog to win over all the champions not once, but three times, so the British championship is a hard-earned title – not a bad thing! The first- and second-place winners are critiqued, and those critiques are published in the British dog papers. After the Windsor show, I ventured north to the English-Scottish border country and stayed the night at a public house in the Cheviot Hills, the birth place of the Dandie Dinmont Terrier. As I sat with my gin and tonic at a picnic table, computer on my lap, writing the critique of the Dandies I judged the previous day at Windsor, it seemed a very fitting end to a wonderfully unique experience.

Betty-Anne Stenmark of Woodside, Calif., is AKC approved to judge the Hound and Working Groups, as well as assorted Terrier, Toy, Non-Sporting and Herding breeds. She can be reached at judgesperspective@dogworld.com.

Interested in reading more about dog shows and conformation judges? Go to www.dogworld.com to check out Dog World magazine's latest news.