

Judging Local Dog Shows

Judges know dogs, but what if they know their exhibitors?

Betty-Anne Stenmark

"It is a dog show, not Christmas. There are no gifts," is what I say to myself before I step into the ring to judge at a local dog show.

No one enters a dog show to lose. You will often hear an owner say, "He's just a puppy. I'm entering him for the experience." An owner of an 18-month-old dog might tell his friends, "He's just an immature teenager. He's got a lot of maturing to do before winning." And yet another owner will say, "I don't normally have her type, but he is just so handsome I am going to show him anyway." There is a tiny place in every exhibitor's heart that holds out the hope that no matter what the odds, today he just might get lucky. This scenario happens at every dog show whether it's 30 minutes from my house or a five-hour plane ride across the country.

If that dog show is just 30 minutes from my house, add one more factor to the exhibitor's expectations: "I've known the judge for years."

I have been in dogs for more than 40 years and lived in Northern California for 33 of them. I know a lot of dog people!

Over the years I have corresponded with many of these people. We've exchanged e-mails, notes, phone calls, and pleasantries. I hear responses like, "Oh we're great. Remember that young puppy I told you about last year? Well, he won a major last weekend!" Or: "We just got back from our National Specialty, and we won!" As my husband has always said, "We root for our friends," and we are genuinely happy for them when they win. Would we necessarily point to that dog and award that win if we were in the center of the ring judging? Maybe, maybe not, but that's what makes dog shows. If we all judged exactly alike, there would be no reason to hold a dog show.

When I began judging, I felt very uncomfortable when someone I knew walked into my ring as an exhibitor. If I liked their dog best, I wondered what the other exhibitors might have thought of me acknowledging this dog. Would they think it was because I knew them? Would they realize that, in my opinion, this was the best representative of the breed in my ring? Was there the perception that perhaps my ring wasn't a level playing field, that this person who knew me had an advantage? The coup de grâce was when I was judging Salukis in Seattle some 20 years ago, and there running around my ring was a woman who babysat me when I was a newborn. I placed that beautiful bitch of hers Best of Breed that day; the bitch went on to have many specialty wins in her career. That was a surreal experience, I can assure you! After more than 30 years of judging this no longer bothers me like it once did. Perhaps I've become desensitized – it's happened over and over and over again.

I am still a very active breeder of Dandie Dinmont Terriers. People who buy a puppy from me are told that it may never be shown to me. AKC Guidelines state that after a dog has been out of the judge's kennel for one year it may be exhibited to that judge, but personally, I would never allow this. How would this look to other exhibitors of Dandies? Lousy. As a competing exhibitor I would be disgusted, too. There are thousands of dog shows in this country, plenty of opportunities to exhibit on any given weekend to a judge who is not the dog's breeder.

I rarely judge my own breed. When I was first approved to judge Dandies, I promised myself I would not judge them in California, the state where I live and where I exhibited. I don't allow my name to be put on the Dandie Dinmont Terrier Club of America's ballot when we are voting on judges to adjudicate at our annual National Specialty. I would know almost every Dandie that was exhibited and quite possibly its parents and grandparents. I would probably have a preconceived idea of what I was going to do if I was judging the specialty, and that alone is not a good thing.

We judges must "judge on the day," and walk into the ring with an open mind. I am very opinionated when it comes to my own breed. I have very defined priorities when it comes to evaluating a Dandie Dinmont Terrier, as I quite literally "wrote the book" on the breed. I would far rather enjoy the camaraderie at the specialty, the annual gathering of Dandie lovers, than judge the dogs owned and shown by my friends.

Nowadays I accept one judging weekend a year in Northern California, and one in Southern California – that's enough. Some of my favorite shows in the country are held in this state and it's fun to be a part of them, even if it does mean



possibly judging dogs owned by friends. I smile to myself, walk into the ring, and quietly remind myself that it's a dog show, not Christmas. There are no gifts.

Betty-Anne Stenmark is AKC approved to judge all Sporting breeds, all Hound breeds, Saint Bernards, all Terrier breeds, Cardigan and Pembroke Welsh Corgis and Best in Show.

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