

Judging the Veterans Class in Conformation

How should judges evaluate winners of the past?

Jeffrey G. Pepper

The best judges are, without a doubt, those who enjoy what they do. Nearly every judge I know savors the assignment to judge a Specialty show, for it is at the Specialties that we tend to see the greatest number of dogs of that breed congregating in one place. This normally provides the potential for a depth of quality seldom seen at All-Breed shows. One of the many highlights of a judging career often comes from judging a National Specialty.

For many judges, the Veterans classes, where dogs or bitches return to the ring after staying home for some time, are the most difficult. These dogs were the winners of yesteryear, and seeing them again can bring a tear to the eye of even the most jaded fancier. Often, some of the best-quality dogs in the entire show are those competing in the Veterans classes.

Beauty before age

The question often arises as to how Veterans classes should be judged. For me, there is little question. I'm not there to let my sentiment push me into rewarding the oldest dog in the ring with a ribbon. I'm still judging, so I'm looking for the best example of the breed in the class.

At a Specialty, the winner of a Veterans class is eligible to compete for Best of Breed – and sometimes wins. Seeking quality means I cannot forgive the sagging topline caused by having a litter or by age. Seeking quality means I cannot forgive faulty movement. But seeking quality does allow me to ignore those inevitable gray hairs.

One judging difficulty occurs when viewing a dog that retains classic breed type when stacked but, upon closer examination, has not been treated kindly by age and time. This is often the dog that falls apart when gaited. Here the judge faces a tough decision: either recognize the type and place the dog highly in the class, or fault the weaknesses that appear to be the result of the natural aging process. There's no easy answer to such a dilemma. It's difficult to reward a dog that's no longer able to perform its intended function.

In the end, judges are charged with deciding on placements that are based on how the dog looks on the day, not how it might have looked before or even on how it might look tomorrow. Prior records should not figure into the decision-making process.

It's also interesting to see how a breed holds up over time. Has there been a change in the style of dogs since the members of the Veterans class were youngsters? Has the breed improved over time, or has the quality slipped since then? From this point of view, to find that the best dogs in the entire show are found in the Veterans classes generally does not speak well for the breed. The youngsters should, ideally, be of better quality than the older generation, for the job of breeders is to protect and improve the breed.

Big winners of the past

Sometimes a judge finds that one of the dogs in a class was, in its younger years, a big winner. What should a judge do if the dog with the big record has not held up well over the years? Perhaps the dog has lost some of the muscle fill in the skull, creating a head that is not as good as it once was. Maybe the superb movement of years past can no longer be seen. Should a judge recognize the record of the dog by giving it the class or a placement despite the signs of age? A difficult decision.

The owners or handlers of this former winner must also make tough choices. Should the dog be brought out to the show despite its current shortcomings, or should it remain in the comfort of its home where it can rest on its laurels, and its fans can remember it as it once was? For me, despite the temptation to exhibit a dog one more time, it's sometimes best to resist the pull.

Golden years

Sometimes, despite best intentions, personal experience can intrude on the judging process. For example, I've now been judging for more than 23 years. Perhaps the most difficult class I ever judged was a Veteran-Bitch 12-Years-and-Older class at the Golden Retriever National Specialty in September 2001. The show, held in Albuquerque, N.M., about two weeks after the attacks of Sept. 11, was a difficult show for many people. However, it was especially tough for me. I had lost my mother on Sept. 7, and my last Golden Retriever passed away at the age of 13 about 10 days later. 'Lucy'

represented many generations of my own breeding, and was the last of a line of Golden Retrievers I had worked with since 1969. As you might imagine, losing Lucy was not easy.

At that show, the 12-Years-and-Older Veterans class consisted of five bitches. As the oldest Veterans filed into my ring, I began the evaluation process. The last bitch in line seemed to be the one that was not going to get a ribbon. Each of these Golden Retrievers was clearly enjoying their day in the sun as I went over them individually and gaited each dog.

When I came to the last bitch in line, my initial impression proved to be correct. She was going to be the one to leave the ring without a ribbon. As I had with the others, after doing the individual examination, I asked that she be moved in a triangle, and the handler complied. When she stopped in front of me, I asked the handler to take the bitch down and back. The handler swung the bitch around and said, "Come on, Lucy." Well, I lost it. Of all the potential names for a Golden bitch, what were the odds this one would be called Lucy?

In the end, she still didn't get a ribbon.

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