

Putting Up Puppies at Dog Shows

When judges evaluate puppies, maturity shouldn't matter as much as exemplary soundness.

By Richard ("Rick") G. Beauchamp

Who knows what a puppy is going to look like a year from now?" No one knows, of course, but when someone uses that excuse for not putting up the best dog in the Winners class, I can't help but respond: you aren't judging a year from now, you're judging today. None of us who judge have the ability to gaze into a crystal ball and know what will become of any of the dogs that enter our rings, but the thing we do know is what they look like on the day they stand before us.

Our responsibility as judges is to select the breeding stock that will best serve the breed, and we are required to do that on the day that the dogs are shown to us. Neither show records (what any dog has or has not won in the past) nor predictions (what it may or may not win in the future) are of consequence on the day.

What I find particularly disturbing is seeing a mediocre mature dog put up over a brilliant puppy when maturity is the older dog's chief saving grace. Good breeders sell as pets the dogs that they know will mature into only sound and reasonable representative specimens. They keep the puppies that promise excellence.

There is no reason to question lack of maturity when a dog appears in any of the puppy classes – it is a given. The classes themselves were created to allow for that very thing.

Questions arise, however, when a puppy is entered in other classes. Many breeders of long standing take pride in finishing a homebred from the Bred-by-Exhibitor class and will enter their youngster in that class from its first show on. Oftentimes, the puppy will be up against mature individuals of its breed and look out of place. If maturity becomes a question, it is perfectly permissible for the judge to ask the ring steward to check a dog's date of birth.

Checking with the ring steward is not only allowable, it is the only really fair and accurate method for a judge to determine an exhibit's age. Not all exhibitors remember their puppy's exact date of birth; not all exhibitors want to remember.

Winners Dog, Winners Bitch and Best of Breed are so named to indicate they are wins awarded on the basis of the entry's being the best of all competing in their respective classes. They say nothing of the dog's or bitch's age.

Having bred and shown my own dogs in the past, the most important thing about a promising puppy's first shows has been that they be fun experiences. Coming home with a win on one's puppy is always exciting, but like most other breeders, I saw those first shows as experiences. The more pleasurable they were for the puppy, the more certain I was of having a show dog on my hands when it matured.

I did not expect my puppies to act like adults. I made it a practice not to show my puppies to judges who expected them to behave like adults or who had heavy hands when examining them. Good judging is contingent upon realizing that puppies, like all babies, are full of wonder at any new experience, and if they are roughly handled, their opinion of the dog-show experience is going to be negative. I have seen many a promising youngster's career cut short by a judge who was oblivious to this responsibility in examining a novice puppy.

Exhibitor's responsibility

The exhibitor showing a promising puppy must decide ahead of time whether he or she is doing so for a win or to prepare the youngster for a more serious campaign later in life.

Puppies forced into frozen positions like statues or required to perform like seasoned troopers when on the move will hardly have a fun experience. Even if the exhibitor senses that this is what the judge might expect, an anticipated win may have to be conceded for the sake of the puppy's future. An exhibitor should never show puppies to a judge who is known to be heavy handed or unreasonable in his demands of a puppy.

I remember all too well handler Michael Kemp being very concerned at the onset of the show career of the great-winning Bichon Frise bitch, Ch. Devon's Puff and Stuff. It was impossible to know if Puff would behave in the ring or if she would decide to be a holy terror, bounding through the air or slipping her lead and playing catch-me-if-you-can.

Judging her early in her initial days as a Special, Frank Sabella advised Kemp not to attempt to train the mischief out of “Ms. Puff,” as she was known. “When she’s bad, she’ll be impossible,” said Frank, “but when she puts it all together and is good, she will be impossible to beat!” Ms. Puff became a superstar and, in fact, paved the way for the breed to achieve new heights in ring competition. Star quality is bestowed upon only very few of the many dogs that are shown, and it is foolish to attempt to interfere with it – especially during puppyhood.

Nor should the exhibitor rely upon the judge to decide the appropriate class for a puppy. As proud and sure as he might be of the puppy, he must remember that entering the puppy in a class means that the puppy looks ready for that class. For instance, a green but high-quality youngster appearing in the Open Class is showing the dog to a great disadvantage. American-Bred and Open are classes in which judges assume that the entries are fully mature and ready for championship competition.

In the Toy breeds, full coats and size often come early enough to have a puppy look competitive, but this is not the case in most other breeds. A puppy might be appropriately gangly or short of coat, but standing next to a fully mature specimen, the puppy could well appear lacking in quality rather than lacking in age. It should be remembered that not all judges have had the experience of watching every breed they judge progress from puppy to adulthood.

Youth is not a fault. Having myself kicked around this world of ours for well past a half century, I can assure you that there is absolutely, positively nothing wrong with being young! And that applies in every respect, to both man and beast.

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