

First-Timer's Guide to Westminster

Whether at the show or watching from home, here's what you need to know.

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Those dogs go on to represent their breed in the group judging that takes place in the evening (the televised portion for those watching at home). Each of the group judges assesses the dogs on their structure, condition, movement, and showmanship, selecting a first through fourth from among the assembled breeds in the ring. The seven dogs that place Group First then compete for Best in Show.

As one of the few benched shows left in America, Westminster requires dogs not in the judging ring to remain on-site, in a designated benching area, until 8 p.m. Unbenched shows permit dogs, their owners, and handlers to leave the grounds once they have competed and been eliminated from further competition. Old-time breeders lament the passing of the benched shows as these offered tremendous learning opportunities for the public, as well as for newer breeders to gain valuable knowledge from the pros.

To walk the Westminster benching area and meet perhaps three dozen of the top dogs in your favorite breed sitting side by side along with their owners is both a thrill and an education. For dog lovers shopping for a breed but still undecided, it is a great place to do research, see magnificently maintained adult specimens of the breeds that interest you, and witness the grooming commitment that many different dogs require.

TV crews mill about, interviewing the owners and breeders, while the dogs handle the crowds with aplomb. The throngs often include dog-loving celebrities, from Lauren Bacall and Candice Bergen to Glenn Close and Mary Tyler Moore, but all agree it's the four-legged stars that reign supreme at the Garden.

On the perimeter of the benching area, all manner of concession stands beckons. Find your breed's likeness in silver and gold jewelry, embroidered on a sweatshirt, or depicted in chocolate. Grooming tools, food, treats, books, magazines, bronzes, and prints are available in abundance. Take a tote bag, and prepare yourself for congestion.

February Treat Whether you are bundled up in blustery Manhattan, carrying shopping bags of dog stuff in both hands, or relaxing at home with popcorn, dog-loving friends, and your favorite pooch, Westminster is a great way to spend two days in February. Watch the dogs, in person or on your TV screen; listen to the informed commentary; and share the passion that drives dog fanciers and unites us all as dog lovers.