

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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The film world has its Academy Awards, and the dog world has Westminster. For tradition, glamour, and pull-out-all-the-stops, flashbulb-popping excitement, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show is the only game in town for breeders, exhibitors, judges, and dog lovers.

It actually goes the Oscars one better by offering two entire days and nights of top-drawer competition at New York's Madison Square Garden. TV viewers get to watch the all-important group judging over Monday and Tuesday nights (Feb. 9 and 10, 2009), culminating in the selection of one dog crowned Best in Show.

And speaking of movies, Westminster is even famous enough to have been spoofed on the big screen in the 2000 mockumentary "Best in Show." Filmmakers modeled the fictional Mayflower Kennel Club dog show on Westminster.

It's All About Tradition

Westminster truly is the granddaddy of American dog shows. This month the Westminster Kennel Club stages its 133rd annual show, making it America's second-longest-running, continuously held sporting event. Only the Kentucky Derby can claim an older pedigree, and then by just a single year. Westminster is an American Kennel Club Champions Only show, meaning every dog entered at the Garden has already earned the 15 points required to carry this title the coveted Ch. at the start of his name.

The competition is keen from the get-go with the top dogs in each breed traveling from around the country with their handlers to square off on the green carpet. Handlers and judges alike feel the electricity in the air and can get a little nervous. Indeed, to judge at the Garden is a singular honor.

The excitement transmits down the leash and gets hammy show dogs even more pumped. How will dogs accustomed to showing outdoors on grass perform inside, on carpet, in rings surrounded by wall-to-wall people? That always remains to be seen, and there are surprises every year at Westminster. More than a few canine Cinderellas, unadvertised and unknown, have turned on the showmanship when it counted most and defeated all the VIPs, giving a stunned owner or handler the thrill of a lifetime.

Breed Judging By Day

For purposes of show competition, the AKC organizes breeds into seven groups, based on the dogs' original purpose and function. At Westminster, four of those groups — Working, Terrier, Toy, and Non-Sporting — are judged on Monday. On Tuesday, the remaining three groups — Sporting, Hound, and Herding — are assessed. Dogs are judged at the breed level during the day, with Best of Breed winners named.