

The Purpose of Dog Shows

Sure the dogs are beautiful, but there is an important purpose to dog shows, too.

By Christi McDonald

The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show may seem like a departure from the original dog show, but breed standards remain the same. Photograph by Mary BloomA majestic Afghan Hound floating around and Poodles in flamboyant hairstyles prancing about might make modern dog shows look like nothing more than beauty pageants for dogs. In truth, however, a dog show is a process of judging each dog to determine which one conforms most closely to a written standard ... thus the reason we call it a "conformation" dog show.

In the 1800s, dogs served man in specific ways, as hunters to help bring home food, as shepherds of flocks, or as guardians of the home and property. As a natural course, men would gather, informally at first, to boast about and then to test their dogs' abilities, often at field trials and coursing matches. The fittest were used to propagate more of the same, and thus began the selective breeding of dogs for desired characteristics.

Eventually people began to gather more formally to compare breeding stock; indeed, by the time that first dog show was held in England in 1859, the livestock judging was an established part of the country gentleman's life. That first event was held as an addition to a longstanding poultry show.

As canine competitions became more popular in England, a kennel club was established to register dogs, maintain a printed stud book, and create guidelines for and record the results of field trials and dog shows. These activities were no less popular in the New World, and the United States followed the lead of Great Britain in establishing a national kennel club, known today as the American Kennel Club.

As each type of dog became recognized as a pure breed, fanciers established clubs to look out for the best interests of that breed. Standards were written to describe each breed in detail, including physical characteristics that allowed them to perform their function, as well as their temperaments.

A dog who herded sheep on an open plain all day must be built for stamina, have a thick coat to help protect him from attacks by predators, and must be able to think and work independently. One that coursed hare in the desert must see at long distances, run on hot sand over a long course, turn on a dime, and have a temperament to live a fairly solitary existence with his master.

Climate and topography, as well as the function required of the dog, contributed to the written requirements, or standard, for each breed.

Although in our modern society a dog is no longer needed to point game for his master's supper or to herd flocks in from pasture, the breed standards that were created in the late 19th and early 20th centuries are still used today as a basis of comparison for every breed.

Today's competition is still a comparison of breeding stock against the written breed standards established so long ago.

Christi McDonald is the editor of Dogs in Review magazine.