

This Year's Top Dogs

A sneak peek at Westminster's most promising canine contenders in 2009.

By Kim Campbell Thornton

Crowds at Madison Square Garden during Westminster. Photographs by Mary Bloom Who goes to New York City in February and likes it? Dog people, that's who. Braving blizzards, flight delays, and high hotel rates, they flock to Madison Square Garden, the site of one of the United States' most enduring sporting events: the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, held the second Monday and Tuesday of each February. Top dogs, new breeds and the suspense regarding the eventual choice of Best in Show make it a must-see event for dog lovers, whether they go in person, or view it on television or the Internet.

With 2,500 entries, it might seem as if Westminster is one of those events with the potential for any dog to have its day, but to ensure the entries are the best of the best, it's part invitational and part scrimmage by mail. The top five dogs in each breed are invited to pre-enter on Nov. 1, and entries by mail can be sent starting in mid to late November. They're all delivered to the Westminster Kennel Club on the same day. Once the limit of 2,500 is reached, the remaining entries – numbering in the thousands – are returned.

"In theory, if every dog that was invited was entered, that would be 850, and that would leave us 1,650 slots to fill," says WKC Director of Communications David Frei of New York. "The reality is that not every one of those dogs enters. They've retired or are having puppies or are out of coat."

For a different reason, the No. 1 dog in the country among all breeds won't be at Westminster. Ch. Cookieland Seasyde Hollyberry, a Pointer with 52 BIS wins and 90 Group Firsts (as of press time, October 2008), is owned by a Westminster member, so she can't enter the show. "It'll be the first time in quite a while that we've had a noticeable hole," Frei says.

Top contenders

Among the contenders that have a good chance of standing in the BIS ring the evening of Feb. 10 are a few breeds that aren't your everyday dog on the street. The No. 2 all-breed dog, a Giant Schnauzer named Ch. Galilee's Pure of Spirit, had claimed 38 BIS wins and 75 Group Firsts as of press time.

"Lincoln," the top-winning Brussels Griffon of all time, sports a smooth coat rather than the more common rough coat. Brussels Griffon Ch. Cilleine Masquerade, "Lincoln" to his friends, is ranked fourth among all breeds (as of press time). He is the top-winning Brussels Griffon of all time. In a breed in which most top-winning breed Champions have rough coats, the fact that Lincoln is a smooth is both unexpected and fabulous, says Brussels Griffon breeder Sharon Sakson (Paris Brussels Griffons in Princeton, N.J.), who has bred more than a dozen Champions and is the author of "Brussels Griffons: A Complete Owners Guide" (Barron's Educational Series, 2007).

"He was Group 2 at Westminster last year," Sakson says. "We were all holding our breaths because it looked like he was going to win the Group. It would have been the first Westminster Group win for a Griff since 1985, when Bruce Owen's Ch. Berryhill Gandalf won it. He deserves to win the Group and BIS. He is the best Griff this country has ever seen, a perfect specimen of our breed. We will all be cheering him on to the fullest."

The 2009 World Dog Show winner, Sealyham Terrier "Charmin," is a Terrier Group favorite. Other top-winning dogs of lesser-known breeds to keep an eye on (as of press time) are Sealyham Terrier Ch. Efbe's Hidalgo At Goodspice, No. 5 all breeds and BIS winner at the 2008 World Dog Show; Affenpinscher Ch. Tamarin Tug, No. 6 all breeds; Harrier Ch. Downhome Family Tradition, No. 9 all breeds; and Scottish Deerhound Ch. Jaraluv Oujja, No. 10 all breeds.

How might a Group or BIS win at Westminster affect one of these less-common breeds? Longtime Scottish Deerhound

exhibitor and breeder Christie Keith of San Francisco, a two-term member of the Scottish Deerhound Club of America board of directors and past president of the Northern California Deerhound Club, weighs in.

“Deerhound puppies, although I find them absolutely endearing and beautiful, are to most people’s eyes ugly, so I often think that we’re not likely to become cursed with popularity,” Keith says. “You’re never going to see Deerhounds filling pet homes. For one thing, there just aren’t enough of them. Deerhounds are huge, and they mature very late, so even the most irresponsible, greedy breeder isn’t going to be able to crank out very many puppies. They only come in season once a year. It’s just not likely that you would see a huge increase in popularity of the Scottish Deerhound no matter what happens. I hope.”

Scottish Terrier Ch. Roundtown Mercedes of Maryscot, No. 7 all breeds. Rounding out the top-winning dogs likely to make an appearance at Westminster (as of press time) are Standard Poodle Ch. Randenn Tristar Affirmation, No. 3 all breeds; Scottish Terrier Ch. Roundtown Mercedes of Maryscot, No. 7 all breeds; and Pembroke Welsh Corgi Ch. Coventry Vanity Fair, No. 8 all breeds.

BIS judging

Who will make the decision should any of these dogs make it to the BIS ring? Sari Brewster Tietjen of Rhinebeck, N.Y., who has been “in dogs” since childhood, has bred, raised, and showed more than 14 different breeds. She has judged dogs for more than 40 years. As someone who grew up in the sport of showing dogs, and has attended more Westminster shows than she cares to count, Tietjen was thrilled and deeply honored when she was asked in March 2007 to judge BIS for the 2009 competition. How does one prepare for that kind of judging assignment?

“Pray a lot!” says Tietjen, who has judged breeds and Groups at Westminster nine times previously, including last year’s Toy Group. “Seriously, at that level, you know you are going to have some beautiful dogs in the ring. You have to keep your wits about you, evaluate each dog against its breed standard, and then how it measures up against the other dogs in the ring. I expect it will be a very close, very difficult, and very challenging assignment, but one that I will treasure for the rest of my life.”

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