

## Westminster in Truly Living Color

**At the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, every dog is a champion.**

*By Susan Chaney*

Everybody who loves dogs has seen the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Right? Well, at least on TV. It's an impressive sight: The best example of every American Kennel Club breed trots around the floor of New York's Madison Square Garden. But trust me, watching it on TV is nothing like being there yourself.

First of all, you won't see the breed competitions. This is when as many as several dozen champion dogs, yes, champions of each breed meet in a much smaller ring than you see on TV to see which is the very best of the breed entered in the prestigious show. Even if you've been to a dog show near your home, you most likely weren't seeing many champions there. You saw puppies in their first conformation event and many young dogs working on their championships.

But at Westminster, every dog is already a champion. And they seem to know it. They stand around like regular, albeit beautiful and pampered, dogs outside the ring, but after the steward calls them in, they're ready to put on a show. And since the dogs are champions, it is mainly about showmanship. Does the dog sparkle? Is he on? If not, he's not likely to win, even if dog fanciers everywhere have been tossing his name about for weeks or months.

In addition to the energy of those champions and their handlers, there's a buzz in the air as spectators move from seat to seat, getting closer to the rings in which their favorite breeds are being judged. They whisper to each other about the dogs, speculating on which will take Best of Breed. If you're lucky, you're sitting next to someone who really knows the breed, a longtime breeder, or someone who has studied the breed extensively. You may get a taste of the complexity of breed standards and the importance of a certain head shape, ear placement or tail carriage.

The rankings announcement by the judge (typically a hand gesture toward the final lineup 1, 2, 3, possibly 4 and 5) is greeted with calm professionalism by some handlers and their canine charges or by obvious jubilation, including a big kiss for the winning dog. When you see a handler or owner beam with happiness and give the winner a congratulatory squeeze or pat or shake, you can't help but share in their joy. Years of breeding toward perfection, plus all the training, grooming, travel and expense, have paid off.

But the action isn't all in the rings at Westminster. In the benching area, dogs, owners, handlers and assistants wait, chat, relax, groom, and greet dog lovers during both days of the show. It's a cacophony of legs, tails, tongues, ears, occasionally a bark, and often a crush of people who want to see up close and personal the beautiful, near-perfect specimens of more than 150 breeds. If not crated, the dogs are standing on grooming tables or being escorted to pens that allow them to relieve themselves without going outdoors in New York's unpredictable, but often cold, wet or snowy, February weather.

And that's just during the day. Come evening, the tuxedos and sparkling gowns come out, the TV cameras move in, and the Garden comes alive once again for the group competitions and, ultimately, Best In Show. But then, you've seen that already.