

Campaigning a Dog

How can you and your dog get to Westminster?

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NEW YORK - The old joke goes: "How do you get to Carnegie Hall?" "Practice, practice, practice."

Well, how do you and your dog get to Westminster? Same answer. But no one will deny that a well-padded bank account is as necessary as a well-padded dog crate to make the journey happen in style.

Some people get their jollies whacking a golf ball around on the weekend or hanging out at the marina. Others wake up at the crack of dawn to drive hundreds, even thousands of miles, to exhibit their pride and joy at a dog show. Showing dogs is competitive, exhilarating and a whole lot of fun but, like golf and sailing, it's a pricey hobby.

Assuming you have a dog with show potential — and your breeder is generally in the best position to tell you if Phydeau has star quality or should continue to reign as a champion couch potato — dog-show entry fees will set you back around \$25 per day. However, that doesn't factor in gas, tolls, lodging, meals on the road and at the show, a baby sitter, wear and tear on your vehicle, grooming and showing paraphernalia (from shampoos and coat preparations to grooming table, hair dryer, show leads, bait and squeaky toys) and more. It does start adding up.

Even if you've taken handling classes, have the moves down pat and can present your dog to look his best in those two precious minutes the judge is allotted for each exhibit, few of us can afford to take unlimited Fridays and Mondays off work to hit all the show circuits. That's where professional handlers come in.

Not unlike jockeys in the horseracing world, handlers possess the expertise to pull the best out of each animal in their care. And many a four-legged mama's boy who wouldn't show for a doting owner will magically sparkle under the tutelage of a talented handler, when he leaves home for a road trip.

Professional handlers charge in the neighborhood of \$75 to \$100 a day for their services, but then there are bonuses as wins increase in prestige. And all clients contribute to a handler's travel expenses when he or she takes a string of dogs out for an extended period.

If the goal is simply to finish your dog's championship (15 points are necessary for an American Kennel Club title) and hang up his ribbons in a place of honor, that can probably be done for a few thousand dollars. However, if you and your handler have your eye on higher stakes — perhaps a place in the Top 10 of your breed, or even the Top 10 all-breeds nationwide, if you're dreaming in Technicolor — that will require a significant investment of time and dollars.

A major campaign — flying and driving to shows across the nation, handling fees, boarding, regular advertising to tell the dog world what Phydeau has accomplished — can set you back \$200,000 or more a year. It makes for an incredible high ... but one that may be too rich for most dog owners' blood.

If campaigning a dog isn't for you, then root for the nationally ranked top dogs in Phydeau's breed as the finest champions in the nation meet to compete at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

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