

## Looking Your Dog's Best

### What ring wear says about a dog.

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Almost as relaxed, the polyester fleece shirts and khaki pants favored by some men handlers say that the dog doesn't have anything to prove, which strikes me as paradoxical, but I'm not really a dog expert so I'm not well versed on this sort of handling nuance. In Canada I've seen a handler a woman dressed in a variation on this style, except her khakis were Bermuda shorts and she added white anklets and a fanny pack that bounced as she ran.

Speaking of bouncing, the favorites among spectators are the extremely well endowed female handlers whose foundation garments prove ill suited to the purpose of heavy lifting for which they were manufactured. To casual observers, these women appear to run the risk of being knocked out by their own body parts. However, when you consider that judges of course! only have eyes for the dogs, it becomes clear that however lousy a gait, any canine is going to look real good against a backdrop of flailing human body parts.

A variation on this message is conveyed by another fashion choice: dresses with enormous flowers or any huge pattern. The purpose of these prints is to draw attention away from the dog, and I realized this as I pondered a handler's ruffled skirt (the utter goofiness of ruffles, and bunched fabrics in general, fascinates many people, calling forth memories of Daisy Duke and Minnie Pearl and casket liner). Distractions like big flowers or ruffles say, "Look at me and not at this dog's bad rear" or topline, or gait, or head.

Leather clothes must be analyzed in context. A suede western-style vest at a Wyoming show says that the dog is in its element. In New York it signifies that the dog is out of its element (which clarification is intended to work to the canine's advantage), and in Chicago it doesn't say anything because plenty of people there don't wear suede vests and all sorts of cowboy clothes, just as plenty of other folks find it funny. But one leather style has universal connotation: black with zippers and buckles means Biker or Biker bitch.

Handlers' hairdos can be fraught with meaning, too, and, again, context matters. In the South, a male handler's puffy hairdo suggests that the dog is either religious or a country music fan, one or both of which might appeal to some judges. The same puffy do in Las Vegas evinces the glamour of Wayne Newton or Fat Elvis (before Fat Elvis, Thin Elvis cared more about being cool than being flashy). Sometimes you'll see a woman who wears her hair to match the dog's; the message here is plain, requiring no analysis, no critique.

In fact, my only advice, if I were asked, would be to the judges. While they have tended to retain the traditional European style, especially at Westminster, where their look is always quietly elegant, they could establish a heretofore unheard of authority over handlers and exhibitors simply by looking more judicial. How? Black robes.