

Show Dog Behavior and Temperments

Are the temperaments of our show dogs getting worse?

Sid Marx

Posted: Thu Jun 23 00:00:00 PDT 2005

While watching the Westminster TV broadcast, I almost broke a leg jumping out of my chair when I heard the announcer say something to the effect that the Neapolitan Mastiff would make a good family dog. I am not technically oriented enough to have TiVo or to have taped the show (I still can't stop my VCR from blinking 12!), but I think that is what he said. I know that the standard for the breed says, "The Neapolitan Mastiff is steady and loyal to his owner, not aggressive or apt to bite without reason. As a protector of his property and owners, he is always watchful and does not relish intrusion by strangers into his personal space. His attitude is calm yet wary." That might be what the breed is supposed to be, but with all due respect to the writers of the standard, and to the announcer who I doubt has ever had to get out of the way when one of these massive animals spun on him in the ring that is not what we have seen at the shows. There is no doubt that there are well-tempered Neapolitans, but from my experience, and that of many judges, the average representative of this breed is anything but calm. Granted, I have seen this breed only at a few shows, but they made a fast impression on me. At one show an exhibit spun on the female judge, knocking her down, and grabbing for her face. At the second show the judge excused the entire entry because she could not go over them. Neither she nor the handlers could stop them from growling and lunging. The next day, a number of judges, handlers, exhibitors, and an AKC rep stood outside the ring in case there was another problem. There were two dogfights with this breed outside the ring, and then the judge barely touched them while "judging" them. I understand that this is not the preferred breed temperament. If that is the case, then these exhibitors certainly need to accept responsibility for the training and socializing of their exhibits, and the parent club needs to make sure that breeders take temperament into account when deciding to breed or not. Of course, we have time and again seen a specific breed used to sublimate a human inferiority complex, and so this type of misbehavior is actually rewarded. In the 1960s and '70s most reputable breeders of Doberman Pinschers would put an obedience title on their puppies before selling them to prove to the public that the dogs were not inherently aggressive. They did this to counteract the people who were buying this breed to replace their own dwarfed self-esteem and confidence. It was an attempt at stopping the breed from getting an unwarranted reputation. More recently we have faced the same kind of thing with Bull Terriers. These examples are at the extreme, and certainly do not represent the great majority of dogs being bred and shown.