

The Secret Lives of Show Dogs

Up close and personal with Westminster contenders.

Nikki Moustaki

When most people think of a Westminster show dog, they imagine a perfectly poised canine specimen attentive to his handler, absolutely obedient, and quite proud of himself. But no matter how perfect these dogs look in the show ring, they are real dogs, with funny quirks and mischievous habits, just like our own pets. Here's a real-life look at some of 2006's top contenders for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in New York.

Ch. Catsun Comanche
Call name: Basil.
Breed: Puli.
AKC group: Herding.
Age: 6.
Owners: Susan McConnell, Ph.D.; J. Crowther.
Handler: Susan McConnell.
Home: Stanford, Calif., with Susan.

Favorite toy: A fuzzy yellow duck that quacks when he bites it.

Favorite reward: Liver, chicken, any kind of meat. Will work for food!

Best canine buddy: Maya, an 18-week-old Puli (Basil's niece), who loves to mouth-wrestle with Basil and jump on his head.

Canine nemesis: Tsavo, Basil's uncle, who needs occasional firm reminders that Basil is the boss.

Favorite contraband treats: Anything that Tsavo has.

Quirks: Pulis are typically standoffish with strangers, but Basil is very friendly and has never met a stranger. His owners joke that he must be part Golden Retriever (but don't tell that to the AKC!).

What drives him nuts: Seeing other dogs walk past his yard. That's when the barking commences!

Sleeping spot: A chair covered with a sheet and a soft fleece pad. Basil doesn't mind the sheet, but every morning the fleece pad is on the floor.

Typical pre-dog show day:

Wakes up at 6 a.m., and goes outside to bark at dogs and people on the street. Comes inside to see if Tsavo needs a reminder about who's the boss. Breakfast eat as fast as possible! When it's bath time, he hides near the desk in an attempt to blend in. After a 45-minute bath and blow-dry, he goes to work with Susan, then comes home and sees if Tsavo needs another reminder about who's the boss. Dinner time eat as fast as possible. He sits at Susan's feet during her dinner, trying to make eye contact in hopes of a morsel. Then it's time for a walk. When he comes in, he reminds Tsavo about who's the boss one more time, then jumps in his favorite sleeping chair, removes the fleece pad, then goes to sleep.