

The Underdogs of Westminster

Three owner-handlers recount their experiences at the most prestigious dog show in the country.

By Denise Flaim

To the dog-show newbie, it can be difficult to tell an Afghan Hound from a Saluki, or a Puli from a Komondor. And perhaps even less obvious are the different categories of humans at the other end of the leash, arguably the noblest of which is the owner-handler.

Unlike professional handlers, who are paid to condition, train, and exhibit their clients' dogs, owner-handlers show the dogs who crowd their couches and command their hearts. Most have no financial incentive when they walk inside a show ring — just the desire to present their own dog to his best advantage, and maybe win some ribbons in the process.

There is no more impressive show than Westminster, which defies marrow-chilling weather, gridlock, and innumerable other logistical snafus in New York every February to present dogdom's version of the Super Bowl. For any handler, trotting your dog on Madison Square Garden's iconic green carpet is a milestone as memorable as your first car or kiss.

Here are three owner-handlers who have shown at the Garden, and, like Adam and Eve, always long to return.

Margery Good, Cochranville, Pa.

Photo by Mary Bloom If there is a guru among owner-handlers in dog shows right now, it is Margery Good, whose 4-year-old Sealyham Terrier Charmin (Ch. Efbe's Hidalgo At Goodspice), is one of the nation's top-ranked dogs. As his name suggests, Charmin started off life as a "squeezably soft" puppy, but he has succeeded beyond even Mr. Whipple's wildest dreams.

The victor in the Terrier Group at Westminster in 2008, Charmin also won the prestigious all-terrier Montgomery County Kennel Club show in Blue Bell, Pa., and the World Dog Show in Stockholm, Sweden, which drew some 22,000 dogs from all over the globe. In 2007, Charmin took top honors at the AKC/Eukanuba National Championship in Long Beach, Calif.

For her part, Good began in obedience in 1964 with a German Shepherd Dog, segueing to the breed ring some four years later with a Dalmatian. In 1970, she acquired her first Sealyham Terrier, and started handling professionally a decade later.

All the while, Good bred Sealyhams, showing her own Goodspice dogs as well as those of her clients.

"I have the benefit of both worlds because I am both an owner-handler and a professional handler," says Good, who describes Charmin as "very generous" in his willingness to perform so consistently for her. "But there's no one who can say, 'It's just a dog and just money for her.' To show a fabulous Sealy like this is my heart and soul."

Although many other shows are high profile and well-publicized, Good says Westminster has a cachet that resists categorization. "It's special particularly because it's televised," she says. "It's a very old dog show, there's a lot of pomp and circumstance, and it has been able to maintain the spotlight. And many exhibitors make Westminster a culmination of their career — many dogs retire after winning there."

No matter the outcome of this year's show, retirement is not in the cards for Charmin, who is in his prime and has many shows ahead of him, Good says. But, she admits, winning Westminster would be the "icing on the cake."

David Murray, Los Angeles

Photo by Mary Bloom David Murray shows "TTs" — Tibetan Terriers to the uninitiated — and his RJ (Ch. Players Prodigy) has gone Best of Breed at the Garden for the last three years. Picking up the mantle is RJ's daughter Bailee, (Ch. Players Protocol), who was a top-ranked dog in the breed in 2008, a distinction that earned her an automatic invitation to Westminster this year. Murray, of course, hopes for another generation of Westminster winners.

Bit by the dog-show bug as a youngster, Murray started showing his Shetland Sheepdog Chips in obedience at 12, and soon he was a top-ranked dog in the world of long Sits and dumbbell retrieves. A couple years later, Murray ventured into the conformation ring with his Golden Retriever, qualifying for the Junior Showmanship competition at Westminster in 1976.

As owner-handler résumés go, Murray's is an enviable one. His dogs have won the national specialty — an annual show limited to just one breed — six times. He has won Best of Breed at Westminster six times with two different dogs, getting two Group placements in the process. Collectively, his dogs have won more than 40 all-breed Bests in Show, and taken the blue ribbon in the Non-Sporting Group more than 250 times.

A common refrain among owner-handlers is that dog showing is the one sport in which amateurs can compete against paid professionals, as Murray's record amply proves. But there are some disadvantages, he notes, "the most obvious one being that you are not paid for your time at dog shows."

A two-day show can easily add up to the equivalent of a mini-mortgage payment. Between gas, hotel stays, entry fees, and meals, \$500 isn't unheard of — and that doesn't include advertising or photography costs for those dogs "campaigning," or competing for top status.

"The biggest challenge is balancing my career and my income with being able to actively campaign these dogs," says Murray, a hair stylist who goes to some 80 dog shows a year.

But there are corresponding advantages to being an owner-handler, he adds. "You have a long-term, one-on-one relationship with the dog and a rapport because you are with them 24/7." Such day-in-and-day-out living helps with a high-maintenance breed such as the TT. On a show day, it might take Murray more than two hours to prepare Bailee for her ring call.

Putting that time in helps on the performance front. "Tibetan Terriers tend to push your buttons a little bit, and they're spontaneous," he says. "They can be stubborn one day — and absolutely perfect the next."

Deb Kern, Aurora, Ill.

Courtesy Deb Kern Last year was Deb Kern's first time showing at the Garden, and she can describe the feeling with just two words: goose bumps.

"I was like a deer in headlights," she says.

Kern, who showed her then-2-year-old Beagle Gambler (Ch. Kowtown's Know When To Hold 'Em), had experience with benched shows like Westminster, where dogs are required to be kenneled on aisle-long wooden benches so the public can meet and greet them. But even though she was an old hand at her local benched show in Chicago, Kern was unprepared for Westminster's bling factor.

"You're in awe, almost star-struck," says Kern, who has been showing for about eight years, and just co-bred her first litter. "I was amazed at the fur and jewelry."

Because he was relatively unseasoned as a show dog and exposed to arguably the world's most distracting dog-show venue, Gambler's performance in the ring was more Timex than Cartier. "There was a little girl sitting on the floor ringside with a stuffed-animal Beagle, and my dog thought it was for him," Kern remembers in exasperation. "He was a little clueless."

Whether you are a dog or a handler, there are no shortcuts in learning and perfecting the dog-show game, admits Kern, who ticks off some of her beginner's mistakes, like tripping on her skirt and wandering across the ring as if she were browsing at Bloomingdale's.

"My breeder would stand on the side of the ring with her hand over her eyes, just barely peering out," she remembers.

Now a Westminster alum, Kern says the experience has made her more confident at her local dog shows. And her first time at Westminster was made all the more special by the history-making win of Uno the Beagle, who is Gambler's distant relative.

"I was really rooting for Uno," Kern says. "If I never go to Westminster again, I'm glad I did, and what a year to do it."

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