

Westminster's 131st Dog Show

Breeders, handlers, press, and spectators anticipate the sold-out 131st Westminster show.

Amy Fernandez

The Westminster Kennel Club was successful beyond the most sanguine expectations in its first annual Bench Show. The number of entries received from all parts of the United States, Canada and from beyond the seas, coupled with the practical interest in it shown by the public at large, proved beyond a doubt that a New York Bench Show, as an annual event, would be both expected with pleasure and sustained with generosity" (May 21, 1877 The Illustrated Sporting and Dramatic Times).

More than a century later, this remains a fitting description. Now in its 131st year, Westminster still surpasses "the most sanguine expectations" of dog lovers everywhere. Not only do entry limits fill within minutes, general admission tickets sold out for the second consecutive year. Even last year's monster blizzard didn't deter attendance. There is definitely something about Westminster that keeps them coming back.

Westminster's founders recognized the importance of appealing to the dog-loving public. In 1887, "Professor St. Elmo's wonderful troupe of trained Poodles" filled the bill. Westminster 2007 may not feature trained Poodles but there will be plenty of special attractions. Along with live TV coverage, Internet viewers can again access streaming videos of breed judging. A new collectible Westminster poster will be on sale to support the club's therapy-dog program, "Angel On A Leash." Now entering its second decade, The Doyle New York Dogs In Art Auction has rapidly become one of the weekend's favorite events, as is The Dog Writers Association of America awards banquet. The Empire State Building will again be lit in purple and gold for Westminster Week.

It's all pretty exciting stuff but mere icing on the cake. Westminster is all about showcasing the cream of the canine crop. "It's the only time all year when all the great dogs are in the same place at the same time," notes Westminster spokesman David Frei. "Some of them haven't been shown nearly as much as others the previous year. Everyone points for this show, so their dogs are all conditioned and primed for their best performances. And if we truly are judging on the day, anything can happen." Anything can happen, but it's only human nature to speculate on the possibilities.

Terriers have traditionally dominated Westminster, adding another notch to their belt last year when the Colored Bull Terrier Ch. Rockytop's Sundance Kid claimed the 44th victory for this group. Three 2007 top 10 dogs hail from the Terrier Group: the Airedale Ch. Evermay's High Performance, the Sealyham Ch. Stonebroke Right On The Money and America's top dog, an Australian import Dandie Dinmont, Ch. Hobergays Fineus Fogg. Airedales and Sealyhams have captured four Westminster BIS wins each. 'Harry' would be the first Dandie and the first Aussie to win. He certainly brings some impressive credentials to the table: He won 30 BIS in Australia including the Adelaide Royal, Melbourne Royal and the Sydney Spring Fair Show.

Terrier specialist Ken Shepard gave Harry his 40th group the day he went on to his 20th Australian BIS, calling him "as near to perfect as I will ever judge." "Wow," says Terrier judge Wayne Lewis, "his large, intelligent eyes capture you first. Through his strong, flexible body, distinctive penciled coat and true terrier temperament, he is the ultimate showman!" Since arriving in the U.S., Harry has racked up 21 Bests, breaking a 29-year-old breed record. He was Group Fourth at Westminster last year and his chances look promising this year.

Frei cautions that we should not get too carried away. "Since 1990, only five times has the No. 1 dog gone BIS at Westminster." So who else has a good shot?

A mutual obsession with Sporting dogs brought Westminster's founders together, ensuring top competition in this group for more than a century. Sporting dogs have grabbed the big prize 17 times, most recently in 2005 when the German Shorthaired Pointer Ch. Kan-Point's VJK Autumn Roses went BIS. No Sporting breed has succeeded more often than English Springer Spaniels, taking Westminster five times, including back-to-back wins in 1970 and '71 for Ch. Chinoe's Adamant James. Elaine Mathis has judged since 1972 and her fourth Westminster assignment will include English Springer Spaniels. "I thoroughly enjoy judging the superb quality of the entrants at Westminster. Exhibitors and dogs perform to their utmost. I am looking forward to the decisions I will have to make on each and every breed I'm doing."

One of her decisions may send the eventual BIS dog to the next round of competition. Two English Springer Spaniels are in the top 10. Ch. Telltale Salute is a national specialty, multiple BIS winner and presently ranked ninth overall. America's

No. 2 dog, Ch. Felicity's Diamond Jim, known as 'James,' has 34 Best in Shows, 20 specialty Best in Shows and more than 80 Group Firsts. "He has flawless, flowing movement and correct spaniel type" says breeder Theresa Patton. "Prior to his specials career, he was an obedience competitor and has two legs on his Companion Dog title. He is a therapy dog and will continue these interests when he retires. I believe that his well-rounded training and incredible heart make him the consummate show dog. He loves what he does, has an incredible work ethic and adores people, especially his handler, Kellie Fitzgerald." Fitzgerald has some experience in this department, having handled Ch. Salilyn 'N Erin's Shameless to Westminster BIS in 2000.

Of course Boxers have triumphed at Westminster on four occasions. America's No. 1 Working Dog, Ch. Bayview Some Like It Hot, is another top-10 competitor. 'Monroe' is the result of two decades of work for breeder Ken Morrison and he is deservedly proud. "Her exuberance in the show ring has earned her 45 all-breed Best in Shows to date.

"She was a beautiful puppy at 6 weeks and grew up to be the outstanding Boxer that she is today. Monroe has an excellent head, smooth body, strong topline, great movement and balance. To complete the package is her show attitude. She loves to show! Going to Westminster this year will be exciting. She will be there as a great ambassador of the Boxer breed. Entering the show with her high ranking and experience brings us great hope for success." These are far from the only serious contenders. Several of last year's heavy hitters could easily advance to the final round.

The 2006 Non-Sporting and Herd-ing Group winners, the Dalmatian Ch. Merry Go Round Mach Ten and the Old English Sheep-dog Ch. Bugaboo's Big Resolution remain top dogs in their respective groups and the 2006 Hound Group winner, the stunning Scottish Deerhound Ch. Thistle Glen Margot, continues as a top-ranked hound.

Dark-horse candidates are always factors to consider, upsetting the best-laid Westminster plans and predictions. "The only surprise at Westminster is if there are no surprises," notes Frei. "At least three times since 1999, the BIS winner wasn't even in the top 10 the year before."

Last year, 96 of the country's top 100 dogs entered Westminster. Every one will have loyal fans rooting for them at the show and at home. Judging by the number of viewers watching Westminster's streaming video, American Eskimo Dogs are a definite spectator favorite. Ch. Silveroaks Juneau Arnold boasts a phenomenal record for one of AKC's newer breeds, 11 BIS and two national specialties, No. 1 American Eskimo for three years and a top-10 Non-Sporting dog for two. According to his breeder, Ruth Sampson, he almost missed Westminster last year. "The airline sent 'Juneau' to Anchorage rather than New York. He spent 27 hours in his crate before we got him back.

"As you can probably guess, we were frantic. The other three dogs with him made it fine, but of course, it was Juneau they lost. Fortunately he is a very together dog and bounced back fast. The airline did send someone to personally deliver him, which was a feat given last year's snowstorm. Anyway, I think we will take him inside the plane with us this year! We haven't decided if it will be Juneau's last show, but we won't miss the Garden."

That sentiment typifies the Westminster experience. It's to be hoped that Juneau will have an uneventful trip to New York and that Westminster 2007 will not be commemorated by another blizzard. But there is no doubt it will be electrifying and unforgettable. Mark your calendar for Feb. 12-13, 2007. For more information, visit www.westminsterkennelclub.org

Amy Fernandez is a monthly columnist for Dogs in Review and Top Notch Toys. She is the author of four books, including Dog Breeding as a Fine Art. She is currently working on her next book, Strategic Planning Manual for Dog Breeders. She has been attending Westminster for two decades.

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