

Inside the Mind of a Judge

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Chances are you have been at ringside watching a class being judged and you sorted out the class in your mind. You may have agreed with the judge and felt you did a good job, or you may have disagreed with the judge and felt you were more qualified to be on the woolsack than the person in the middle of the ring. Either way, I suspect all of us make a determination to try judging from a similar experience.

Once you find yourself in the middle of the ring, believe me your world will turn upside down. You will first of all realize that you probably never really judged a class of dogs before - even from outside the ring. What you probably did was sit ringside where you didn't have a complete perspective of the dogs and rooted for your favorite exhibit - finding good reason why no one else should win. You probably didn't even really watch all the exhibits in the class. What you will encounter in judging is that you must pay attention to every exhibit equally. When the dogs enter the ring, you must give every exhibit its just due. I feel like a patron of the dogs who come into my ring, I want them to give the best performance they can. The classes which are easy to sort out, like the kind you probably watched from ringside when you decided you'd make a great judge, are not a challenge for anyone. In fact, I've had classes I could sort out practically as the dogs entered the ring. That, my friends, takes very little talent - that's nothing more than easily discernable levels of quality in the exhibits.

The real challenge will be when you must sort out a class of exhibits all with good and bad points. The exhibits will have degrees of type features, various structural strengths, perhaps not extreme variances in movement and similar showmanship. Each animal will create a complex list of strengths, weaknesses and many areas of an average rating - not faults and not outstanding qualities. Now you will be earning your \$3-per-dog judge's fee!

I have heard Ann Rogers Clark comment in the press that the process of judging is taking all the bits and pieces of information about each dog and putting them into your "little computer" and out must come an answer. I have found many times this is exactly the process. You must reward the whole dog, not give out a blue for head and a white for rear movement. I feel it is this ability to synthesize information which really separates the men and women from the boys and girls in judging. Most people, I find, can stand and give a fairly accurate accounting of any single animal. The rather extraordinary happening is when you take all this information and come up with a specific

order of the animals. In a class with outstanding exhibits and generous variability across exhibits, you can rely on your computer to simply provide the answers. However, when judging very tight classes, either very good or rather mediocre, you will need to help yourself out with "self talk". What I mean is that while you are judging, you are actually talking to yourself about the exhibits (not out loud, of course!) You will find this must be a conscious effort, because if you do not, you may find yourself on the last exhibit without any real information on which to base your decisions. You will ask your computer to render a ruling, and the computer will not answer!

You might feel if this is the case, then one way of ordering the dogs is just about as valid as another. As long as the really good dogs are recognized then you may feel this is satisfactory. Perhaps there are people who feel this way. I do not. I enter the ring imagining some all knowing being hovering over the ring who knows exactly how the dogs should be ordered. Let's call him "Alva". I feel my job is to match as closely as possible what this fictitious being's decision would be. I do not pretend to always meet this goal, but I can tell you when I finish a class in which I am unsure whether I did the right thing, I play it over in my mind many times until I either decide I did the right thing or I seek to learn more.

In judging large entries, I find I must adjust my thinking process for each class. I may have a class of a level of mediocrity that structure is my main criterion. With exhibits who are not outstanding in virtue, I find it an appropriate decision criterion. On to the next class, full of quality, and I must use much more breed specific criteria. I can begin nitpicking on type features. I think I had to learn this, as I found myself very perplexed when judging first a class of competitive exhibits in which I was splitting hairs on type and movement and the next one in which looking at the trees only confused me when I stood back and saw the forests!

One of the biggest shocks you will find when judging is your susceptibility to politics. I will define "politics" to be anything that enters your mind while judging that isn't directly associated to the dogs. It may be a recognized handler, it may be a friend showing the dog, it may be a nice little old lady who has shown you three exhibits already and you've had to put her down each time. It might be someone giving you an intense stare, or someone who is clearly clueless, or the driver of the car that cut you off in traffic on the way to the show. You will ask yourself questions like, "OK, I like this second dog a little better but the first one is being shown by a handler - what if that second dog came from a pet store or some tacky breeder?" In every instance, you must realize within yourself your reactions to these matters are wholly and

completely inappropriate in your assessment of the exhibit. A trick I learned fairly early on was to avoid looking at the handler as much as possible. I suppose I might come across unfriendly when I do this (although I try to affect a smile as I greet each exhibit in order to relax the exhibitor) but it certainly works for me. If you find that you end up putting up pet store bred animals on a regular basis, you can then retire to another interest. But give yourself and the exhibit the benefit of the doubt.

I think to really be a good judge of a breed you must truly *know* that breed. In this country, at any rate, we seem to have the opinion if we can memorize the standard and we know how to examine the breed, we are pretty much ready to judge. I feel the standard is a valuable reference piece of information, but your challenges in judging will likely not be in the standard. The standard may say, "coat is medium length." In the ring you have 6 exhibits with somewhat identical coats and one with a coat which is longer but which one could call medium. Is it a fault? Because it's different is it a concern? How big of a fault? Give that amount of variation to every describable part of a dog and you have a fairly good understanding of the kinds of challenges you'll face in the ring. The computer generated images I've seen of identical dogs with one faulty feature are probably good teaching techniques but they do not represent real life. You will have a ring of nine dogs with six head types, seven different proportions, three coat types, four sizes, five different ways of moving, and all the variations in between. Unless you have exposed yourself to all the, at minimum, common variations in a breed and know from knowledge which are OK and which are going the wrong way, I can't imagine how your opinion is going to be of much value to the assembled collection of breeders who brought you their exhibits.

I have always been amused that as a judge you arrive on a red carpet and you feel like you must seek an escape out the bathroom window when you're done! The only exceptions, I believe, are those judges who are judging again the next day. (As a specialist judge, I rarely judge the next day.) If you are attracted to judging from an ego-satisfying perspective, I recommend other pursuits. Like working out in a gym and going to the beach. Or giving large sums of money to non-controversial organizations. Judging, like breeding, is an art and a talent. I tend to think it has rather fewer tangible rewards. But if you are the type who has demonstrated an ability for picking stock, you are probably a good candidate for the vocation. If you have concerns because you feel it is a big responsibility, then you are probably a very good candidate. There is no breed which has too many top flight judges amongst its ranks.

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