

THE NEWCOMER'S FIELD GUIDE TO DOG SHOW PEOPLE

by Linda Hazen Lewin

As a novice, a dog show can be a daunting experience. The initial impression is often one of a single-purpose county fair where many grim-faced people run about with numbers on their arms and dogs in tow, and where, if one can judge by their facial expression, only about 1 in 20 of them is actually having fun. Following is a short list of the most frequently-encountered personages at a dog show, and how to identify them by their typical plumage, temperament, demeanor and call:

People With Dogs

Professional Handlers: Professional Handlers (PHs) are those who show dogs for a fee, so the dogs' owners are spared the joys of kneeling in the mud in their own business suit, or having their last pair of pantyhose split on the second day of a 10-day circuit. PHs can be discerned from other exhibitors by several methods. One is their somewhat officious and aloof manner around ringside (which is difficult to master when you have muddy knees and/or split pantyhose). Outside the ring, PHs rarely acknowledge anyone except the judge (whom they know personally), other PHs (whom they know personally), and their own kennel help (whom they either know rather too personally, and who are from foreign countries and have unpronounceable names). "Kennel help", by the way, are those nubile young men and women who race back and forth from the grooming area to ringside like orbiting comets, bringing dogs to their PH to show and taking already-been-shown dogs back to their crates in a never-ending cycle. This is called "learning the business". Meanwhile, the PH stands there, dogless, squinting at the competition and deciding whether to get his or her armband the usual half-second before going into the ring, or give the steward a real shock and get it a whole minute ahead of time.

PH plumage is among the nicest seen at the dog show, besides that of the judges and the junior handlers (q.v.), because the kennel help are the ones who do the dirty work outside the ring. PHs have no reliable call, but do sometimes change color abruptly in the ring when they don't receive the award they expected. Generally speedier in motion when leaving the ring than when entering it.

Owner-Handlers: Owner-Handlers (OHs) are people who show their own dog(s), rather than hiring a PH. They are roughly divided into two groups: Experienced OHs (EOHs) and Novice OHs (NOHs). We will discuss them separately.

At first glance, EOHs may be difficult to differentiate from PHs. Their plumage is similar and their general look of competence, control and 'cool' is the same. The way to tell them apart is outside the ring. EOHs always have a dog with them because they don't have kennel help to bring them their dog at ringside. Also, EOHs do talk to people and usually gravitate to, or form on their own, a small circle of other EOHs almost from the moment they arrive on the grounds. (The really well-established EOHs are generally prominent breeders, and they often arrive at the show with their very own personal circle of communicants, called "disciples".) EOHs know everyone who has their breed and they know all the dogs in their breed by registered name, call name, pet name, pedigree, show record and degree of quality (which they are constantly critiquing). This allows them to chatter on freely in rarified terms about the latest breedings, wins, dogs and people without a newcomer having a clue as to what they're talking about. (By contrast, the PH might not even remember the name of the dog they have on the end of the lead at any given moment). If an unknown competitor shows up, EOHs give their dog a quick visual once-over and then talk about it behind their hands.

EOHs never buy a catalog. They arrive at the show in enormous motorhomes with six ex-pens bungeed on the front, even if they're only showing one Chihuahua that day. However, they only bring their dog and a small bag of equipment to ringside. Distinctive call: "Can I see your catalog a minute?"

NOHs, on the other hand, are easily picked out. They arrive at the show three hours before they are due to go in, with their St. Bernard stuffed into the back of the family Toyota. To ringside they bring the dog, its crate, its bowl, a water jug, a bag of dog food, a large blanket, three chairs, a Coleman cooler, four kids (two fully ambulatory, one in a stroller and one an infant), the spouse, and a portable TV. They always have their armband on three breeds before theirs is to be judged, and they always buy a catalog (which is how they meet EOHs). For all their advance preparation, NOHs are often the last ones into the ring because by the time their class is actually called, they've passed out from exhaustion. NOHs are generally either overdressed or underdressed for the occasion, and have been known to show their dogs on flat collars and chain leashes.

For all that, their typically sweet, earnest, and somewhat adlepatated temperament is among the best one will meet up with at a dog show, although after the eighth time one of them is late for his or her class, it starts to wear thin. The distinctive call is raucous, and usually shouted across the ring to the family: "Hey, Honey, look! We got fourth! Isn't that GREAT???!!!!"

Junior Handlers: JHs may be confused, at first, with kennel help. However, this is only because of the similarity in age and intensity of the facial expression. The plumage is distinctly different. While kennel help are invariably in white grooming smocks with pawprints and clots of hair stuck to them, JHs are far and away the most impeccably dressed people at the show, including the judges, the show chairman and the AKC field representative (q.v.). The average JH looks like a recent appointee to the ambassadorship of Great Britain, and a whole class of them filing into the ring evokes images of an opening session of Congress, but more dignified.

The JHs' expression and demeanor is unique in the world of dogs: in the standing line-up, they stare intently down at their stacked dogs with a slight frown that says "I'm very constipated, and so is my dog." This effect is only interrupted by piercing glances up at the judge, at which point the expression changes instantaneously to a disconcerting and maniacal sort of rictus which says, "All better!" This transformation is exaggerated even further when the judge has the JH gait the dog. The JH then ratchets their skills into high gear, somehow running the dog around in a circle but never unpinning the judge from that death's head grin. It is a effect worth watching, but weirdly reminiscent of the scene from "The Exorcist" when Linda Blair's head creaks slowly around backward. Throughout the entire performance, their clothes never wrinkle.

JHs are the only exhibitors who routinely congratulate each other on their wins, although it may be done through jaws clenched so tightly that one can almost see their orthodonture shifting. JHs do not have a readily identifiable call, as custom forbids any audible reaction whatsoever. Noises are strictly the purview of the parents of the JH, who are at ringside. (They are the ones with the pawprints and clots of dog hair stuck to them.) These calls range from high-pitched screams of delight (when the child wins) to a sharp but hushed squawk of "Andrew! Bring that dog over here!" (when the child doesn't win).

Obedience Exhibitors: OEs are quite distinctive in appearance from conformation handlers. Priding themselves on the fact that their dogs 'have brains, not just looks', the exhibitors dress for workmanlike practicality. Jeans or chinos with cotton shirts are popular on both the males and females of the species, with comfortable all-terrain shoes. The fancier plumage of the conformation ring is almost never seen.

Oddly, OEs are not found in the area of the obedience rings before they are to be judged. Since they are not allowed to practice with their dogs on the show grounds, you will find most of them far from the rings, pacing seriously about like wind-up toys, dogs at heel. OEs have a peculiar, Groucho Marx-like carriage, reminiscent of someone who badly needs a back brace or is already in one. They execute turns with military precision, and they always come to a halt with their feet exactly together. Then they lean over stiffly and praise their dog in a mechanical manner. If the dog misbehaves, the OE may erupt in a sudden display of noise and violence, but then immediately returns to that grim pacing. It's frightening. The more advanced OEs carry small baskets or pouches with them, full of dumbbells and gloves called 'articles'. These are only handled with tongs and are guarded jealously lest anyone touch them.

For all that, OEs as a group generally have affable temperament so long as one approaches them after they have shown their dog. (Not right afterwards -- give them 15 minutes or so to get their blood pressure under control). They are known for their physical stamina (all that heeling), adaptability (practicing and showing in all kinds of weather, on all kinds of terrain), helpfulness (suggesting training solutions for your dog, which they've never worked with), mental stability (surviving every sort of embarrassment from their own dog in the ring), and big hearts (those with small hearts don't survive their first 5-minute out-of-sight down stay).

The only exception to this affability is the exhibitor competing for an OTCh. OTCh.-level competitors, like African Cape Buffalo, are dangerously unpredictable and should be left strictly alone.

People Without Dogs

Judges: Judges are those official-looking officials in the middle of each ring. Their plumage is wildly variable but generally falls somewhere in the range of sporty to dressy, depending on the weather and the venue. At some of the fancier shows, plumage can become positively splendiferous, including sequins on both males and females. No matter what the attire, the infallible means of identification is the purple badge they have on. This badge is critical for the judges because it gets them free meals, free hotel rooms, free transportation and a check from the club treasurer at the end of the day.

Conformation judges are usually seen in the middle of the ring with a line of dogs and handlers tearing around them in a circle, trying to look like they're having fun. The judge scrutinizes them all with feet slightly spread (for balance), hands clasped behind the back or folded across the chest (to keep them out of the way), and eyes squinted (so as to look sagacious). Older judges have been known to fall asleep in this stance, so it behooves the first exhibitor in line to get clear instructions ahead of time as to when to stop running around the ring.

The call of the conformation judge cannot usually be heard outside the ring as they are given only to short consultations with the exhibitor nearest at hand. Younger judges may be chattier than older judges. Some elderly judges have been known to reduce their instructions, over time, to a combination of grunting and pointing, which the exhibitor must then interpret and execute properly. It's a skill.

Obedience judges look like high school gym teachers sans the whistle. They tend to be more athletic than their conformation counterparts, as they must follow each exhibit around the ring as it performs the exercises. They carry a clipboard and a pencil everywhere with them, and they can be heard calling commands to the exhibitors who, in turn, command their dogs. This makes the obedience rings much more interesting to watch than the conformation rings, where everything seems more private and quite inexplicable from the outside (and sometimes from the inside). Because of all this activity, obedience judges' plumage runs more to the practical/sporty side of the spectrum than the conformation judges'.

Obedience judges are very particular about their rings, pacing them off, inspecting the ground for dog-distracting detritus, personally setting jump standards to their own satisfaction, and measuring everything in sight with their own personal tape measure (which they all carry), so as to make it fair for each competitor. Conformation judges, by comparison, have been known to lose half their entry in a ring crevasse and mark them all absent before noticing anything was wrong. Obedience judges are also skilled at totting up entire score sheets of two-digit numbers in five seconds or less.

Stewards: The steward is the person sitting at the table by the ring gate who isn't the judge and isn't an exhibitor. As is the case in most walks of life, this most unobtrusive person, with the dullest plumage, is actually the one doing most of the work. The conformation ring steward hands out armbands to the exhibitors, lines up the exhibitors for the classes, arranges the ribbons and trophies on the table for the judge, and calls for clean-up and for the photographer as needed. The obedience ring stewards perform all of the above and also stand as "posts" for the Figure-8 exercise, diddle about with gloves and dumbbells for various retrieving exercises, adjust jumps, and generally see to it that the judge stays on time and the ring runs smoothly.

Stewards dress strictly for practicality, as they have to work at the show all day. Indeed, on a rainy or cold day the stewards may be the only people who seemed to have had common sense enough to wear boots or a proper coat, since everyone else is concerned with looking elegant. They generally carry a largish sort of bag with them, and this bag has every possible emergency item in it, from weights for holding down ribbons on a windy day, to an extra pair of socks, to a fully-equipped first aid kit. The steward's job is to be prepared for any eventuality which might befall them, their judge, or their exhibitors, and the good ones are so prepared.

Stewards have a distinctive call, and one of the most highly valued assets in a good steward is a loud voice. In the conformation rings, it consists of the announcement of a breed name and class, such as "Dalmatians! Puppy Dogs!" used to summon the entrants into the ring for judging. In obedience, they quietly call out the armband number. (They call quietly because obedience exhibitors are usually at ringside when it's their turn, ready to go in. Conformation types are more likely to be carrying on some incredibly important conversation with someone and not paying attention to what class is in the ring). If an armband remains unclaimed, the steward will wave it over their head while shouting the number out. If an errant exhibitor has picked up their armband but has not reported to the ring for their class, the steward will shout out that number as well. Then he or she will fall silent, turn to the judge, and shrug.

Official Photographers: The Official Photographer (OP) looks like someone on safari, but without the attending gunbearers. Typical under-plumage is slacks, all-terrain shoes and a shirt with a many-pocketed vest over top of it. Over-plumage consists of a large camera, a flash unit and a battery pack, with lots of black cording attaching everything to everything else. OPs also carry a set of plastic signs around in one hand, and sometimes a tripod. Despite these hindrances, they are notably agile and can leap tall ring fences in a single bound. When summoned, they can calculate the light angle, plunk the sign rack on the ground, fix the signs in the frame to indicate the win, position the judge, handler and dog to best advantage, drop to their knees, focus the camera, center the picture, throw a toy, snap the shutter, record the exhibitor's armband number in a notebook, wind the film, and be up and gone to the next ring in thirty seconds or less. It is breathtaking.

OP behavior is noticeable for periods of frenetic activity interspersed with periods of total quiescence, during which time they actually remove their over-plumage and sit next to it on a grooming table. OPs tend to develop crow's feet due to weekends of peering into a viewfinder at the shows, alternating with weekdays of squinting at their airbrush work in the darkroom. The distinctive calls can vary in content but tend to be delivered in punchy, staccato bursts, such as: "Rear foot! Your side! Back an inch!"

Breeder-Spectators: BSs (forgive the acronym) are experienced dog people who, for whatever reason, are not showing that day but came to the show to watch. They are usually in casual (non-show) plumage and are clumped at ringside, outside the tent. Like EOHs, they are often seen in small groups, huddled around the one catalog somebody bought or borrowed from a nearby NOH. However, the distinctive mark of an armband is lacking from BSs, and they are dogless. Most easily distinguished in the field by their demeanor and call, timing your identification is critical: BSs tend to exhibit distinguishing behavior only as the judge is pointing to his or her selections. At that point they roll their eyes like agitated horses and shriek "You've got to be kidding!" (Alternate call: "Oh my GOD!")

Non-Breeder Spectators (i.e., the General Public): Identical to NOHs in general appearance and number of accoutrements, except without a dog in tow. They fill this void in their lives by asking exhibitors if their child can pet their dog. This request is inevitably made right after said child has finished eating a hot dog and is covered with mustard, and the exhibitor is going in to show a Maltese which he just spent six hours grooming. NBSs are more likely to be seen wandering vaguely from ring to ring, or around the concession stands, rather than planted at ringside. When they do choose a ring to watch, they and their clan tend to stand annoyingly right in the ring gate, thereby preventing the exhibitors from entering. Adult NBSs are often observed making erroneous instructional comments to their fledglings, such as, "Look, dear, see all the lovely Poodles!" (when pointing at a ring of Portuguese Water Dogs). A day in the company of a flock of NBSs can be very confusing for all concerned.

AKC Field Representative: If ever the federal government wanted to fund a Stealth Dog Show Attendee program, the AKC Field Representative, known as "the Rep", would be a Special Agent. Very difficult to spot, due to the fact that only one attends any given show, they tend to appear like phantasms and then just as suddenly melt back into the crowd and disappear. The really skilled ones can disappear from view at ju-u-u-st that precise moment when one's eyes become focussed on them, making one think one didn't really see them at all.

Because they are supposed to attend the show as the ambassador from the AKC to observe judges, answer questions, mediate disputes and calm the hysterical, they are rarely around when you need one. However, the Rep can most often be pinned down at the Superintendent's tent or in the vicinity of whatever club facility houses the public address system. When on stealth duty, they sit decorously at ringside, pretending to chat discreetly with a friend while actually observing the judge. After said judge notices that the Rep is watching, and has passed at least one quart of nervous perspiration, the Rep jots a few notes, smiles mysteriously, picks up his or her chair, and silently moves on to new quarry.

AKC Reps look like adult JHs -- impeccably dressed, shod and coiffed, but sometimes with the additional 'je ne sais quoi' of a hat. Hatted male Reps seem to go for the tweedy-English-country-gentleman look, while female Reps often favor swoopy, broad-brimmed confections which may involve feathers (which can make things exciting around the Sporting ring). Both male and female Reps have that certain uppercrust-y aloofness which surrounds all those who wield a lot of power. This above-it-all aura acts as a natural repellent to dirt, dog hair and most people, and allows the Reps to attend multiple dog shows in their best attire, in all kinds of weather, without getting so much as a micron of dust or a whisper of calumny on themselves.

Superintendent's Staff: The superintendent's staff falls into two categories -- those in fancy plumage who attend to the administrative work of the show, and those in working attire who do the roustabouts' job of driving the big trucks in with the supplies and setting up the rings and tents.

The roustabout types show up the previous evening to set up. This is usually a crew of six or so burly men who only need to know where you want everything placed to have it up and done in a twinkling. It's a fascinating process to watch -- just like when Barnum and Bailey comes to town, but without the inconvenience of elephants. Canny grounds chairmen know that any special favors they may wish can be effectively accomplished through the liberal application of beer. At the end of the show, the crew has the rings and tents down, folded and loaded in no time, and the truck is often rolling off the grounds before the Best in Show winner is back in its crate.

The administrative superintendent's staff is found in the Superintendent's Tent. They sit there, behind a high counter-like structure, writing things (no one is sure what), typing show results into their laptops, and looking annoyed if someone interrupts them with a request. Periodically, they make dashes to the rings to collect judges' books. Then they return to their counter and write some more.

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There are other people at the dog shows, but you're not as likely to see them around the rings because they're too busy working on show day. These people include the Show Chairman, the Hospitality staff, the officers of the club, the Catalog Chairman and the parking people (you saw them when you came in). All these people have important jobs to do before, during, and/or after the show. Any exhausted-looking person in casual (maybe even dirty and sweaty) clothes, stumbling about, mumbling under his or her breath, is undoubtedly one of these and should not be arrested as a vagrant. They deserve a smile and a thank-you, because they, as well as those mentioned above, make it all happen every year for their club, and the exhibitors and spectators who attend their show.

