

JUDGING EXPERTISE: How Much Can We Expect?

Linda Hazen Lewin

Not long ago, a friend called me to blow off steam about the judging at a nearby show. In reviewing the details of what went up, what went down, and how the dogs looked overall, this person finally burst forth in frustration, “But when a judge is approved, that's supposed to mean he's an expert!”

I've been thinking about that comment ever since. Just what is an “expert”? Does the AKC approval process allow only “experts” to become judges? Is it even reasonable to expect a judge to be an “expert” in any given breed?

My old Webster's defines “expert” as “one who has acquired special skill or knowledge of a particular subject; an authority or specialist”. This definition is probably applicable to most judges as regards dogs in general, as opposed to horses, cats or geraniums. Given the written tests, interviews, mentoring, seminar attendance, and provisional assignments required of a prospective judge by the AKC, it must be assumed that some knowledge of breeds applied for is demonstrated. The approval system is probably as thorough as it can possibly be at weeding out the real know-nots and giving people input before the person is officially “approved”.

However, with any given judge, the word “expert” is probably inappropriate as regards his or her knowledge of a specific breed (with the possible exception of his or her own breed with which he or she has personal breeding and exhibiting experience). After all, young breeders of 4 or 5 years' experience who voice too-strong opinions are often derogatorily labeled “self-proclaimed experts” or “90-day wonders”. This being the case, how is a non-breeder judge supposed to be an “expert” after only some ringside observation, a videotape, a seminar, and an open-book at-home test? If one must have more than 5 years of hands-on experience with a breed to have one's opinions of that breed taken seriously, our all-breed judges would have to be upwards of 600 years old!

Obviously, we must find a way around this problem, as 600-year-old judges just don't draw well at the shows. The AKC approval system for judges as it currently stands provides for a judge having a working knowledge of the breed(s) in question. The provisional judge must show, by word and action, that he or she knows the basic faults and virtues of the breed(s) applied for; that he or she can choose dogs of a consistent type, make and shape; and that he or she knows the rules and can run a ring. As we all know, some are better at it than others.

The differences in skill level from one judge to the next has, in my opinion, more to do with the character of the judge as a person, and his or her approach to learning, than it does with any shortcomings in the approval procedures and requirements. The judge who takes the time necessary for continuing education, who isn't afraid to ask questions of experienced breeders, and who confines his or her ultimate decisions to the lower end of the show lead, will inevitably learn more, earn a higher level of respect from the fancy, and will draw higher entries than the judge who already “knows it all”, who takes offense at having his or her mistakes corrected, or who only wants to “check off the box” on their way to Group approval. It is a level of interest in learning each breed well and the willingness to accept correction which the approval procedures alone do not create or enforce in a person: these traits come from within.

The natural ability to perceive quality, known as “an eye for a dog”, can put a judge strides ahead of others who really have to work at it, but neither will this do the judge or the fancy any good at all if the judge won't follow through in the ring. If a judge cannot act on the courage of his or her convictions, all is lost regardless of that judge's innate talents or factual knowledge of the breed or Standard. A breeder-judge, the alleged “expert”, throws it all away if he or she judges based on personal friendships, previous records, what other breeder-judges have done, or who used his or her stud dog recently. Personally, I would rather show to a new judge who is thinking, learning and questioning, than to a so-called “expert” who is unreceptive to any input except an offer of a judging assignment.

We all like to see honest, competent judging. We all like to feel that the judge cares about what he or she is doing. We all like to win, of course, but most of us can justify a judge's decision in the face of a loss if we can observe the first two items in action. We can offer educational opportunities through several different media (not to be interpreted to mean berating a judge at ringside) and we have every opportunity to intercept a true incompetent at the provisional level by writing to the AKC Judges Department.

If a real turkey is already approved, don't enter under him or her. But in the meantime, let's cut the other judges some slack, huh? Most of them have a lot of other breeds to learn about in addition to yours or mine (yes, Fenwick, there really are other kinds of dogs besides Transylvanian Rope Retrievers!). Do they all have to be “experts”? I hope not, because there is another definition of that word: an 'ex' is a has-been, and a 'spurt' is a drip under pressure.

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