

Norwich Terriers, 5-18

Title: From humble beginnings to social media: Why do we show dogs?

We can remember the old-fashioned reason for having dog shows, breeding better healthier sounder dogs. ~ Annie Rogers Clark

Much has been written about dog shows since Annie Rogers Clark penned those words two decades ago. Historically dog shows were to evaluate breeding stock. But why do people show their dogs today? I've asked myself this question on more than one occasion. After all, it's an expensive (often disappointing) pastime. Overall, our conformation show entries for Norwich Terriers have been declining, especially in the Bred-by Exhibitor class. For some breeders, aging knees are to blame, but even the able-bodied are opting for a handler more often, and for good reason: handlers are more likely to win. And winning is fun!

But winning has changed ... perhaps because the reason for showing dogs has changed, or perhaps because of social media. In more genial times, exhibitors genuinely appreciated the virtues of a competitor's dog. People seemed kinder to each other. The winner was congratulated, and it was sincere ... well, usually. (You bit your tongue until you got back to your set-up if you had to.) I don't remember whooping and hollering when the judge pointed to his or her winner, or the scowls and rolling of eyes from the exhibitors who didn't get the prize they sought ... or routine whining about the judge. Win or lose, it was with poise and grace. It seemed to be more about our dogs, less about our ego.

Dog shows have a humble beginning – the first one, in 1859, was an added attraction to the annual cattle show in Newcastle-upon-Tyne. Only setters and pointers were shown and the prizes were guns! By the end of the century, dog shows were hugely popular and the increased variety of breeds ensured a variety of show classes. Exhibitors sought pride and prestige in winning and displaying their rosettes and cups. Competition was fierce, likely because winning elevated the value of top dogs and their stud fees, and some shows offered cash prizes.

The criteria and qualifications for judging have been controversial since that first show, and their integrity was questioned: Are judges biased towards their friends? Can they be bought? Fierce competition has ramifications, then and now. 'Faking' was reported to be widespread even in Victorian times, with deceptive practices such as trimming ears, coloring coats, and substituting dogs. Since then, the list of deceptive practices has grown and includes surgical alteration – just to win. Another downside to fierce competition is 'kennel blindness' that overshadows the likelihood of seeing the virtues in your competitor's exhibit. All to the detriment of our breeding programs.

Social media doesn't help matters. In real time, a win is short-lived. After all, it's one judge's opinion on THAT DAY. Tomorrow is another day, another dog show, another judge, another opinion ... (unless you chase your favorite judge around the country ... a more modern practice!). Social media keeps the win alive. Wins can be recycled – tell your Facebook so-called "friends" and those "likes" and thumbs-up trigger a rush of dopamine. Before the show is even over, you (or your professional handler) can post your dog's photo with his ribbon ... then purchase the official show photo and post it too ... and if no win, just recycle those old win "memories". Reliving the win feels good. Yes, winning is fun!

Winning with a dog you have bred yourself is more fun, and even more fun if you bred the sire, dam, maybe the grandparents too ... and MORE FUN if you whelped and raised those puppies yourself, picked out the most promising, trained him, groomed him, and stepped into the ring -- your cherished little terrier, his tail up, standing on his toes proudly, with his breeder and handler.

The Norwich Terrier Club of America gives special awards to a member-owned dog and bitch earning all of his or her championship points from the Bred-by Exhibitor class. And rightly so. To all who participate in the BBE class, and to those who strive to breed better, healthier, and sounder dogs, you are WINNERS!

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