

Norwich Terriers, 2-19

Title: Making a Case for Critiques

The Norwich Terrier Club of America requires judges for our national specialty shows to provide written critiques of the dogs judged for both the regular classes and sweepstakes. These critiques are published in our Club's newsletter. The AKC does not require or encourage written critiques, in contrast to some registries and countries where the dog show judge is required or expected to critique at least the top-placing entries. The Kennel Club, for example, requires judges to provide written critiques on 1st and 2nd placed dogs in each breed class at all championship and open shows. Last year, they launched a free online service for judges to publish their written critiques and for exhibitors and members of the public to easily find and view them in one place. An exhibitor can also contact a judge using the contact box at the top of each critique.

Critiques educate the exhibitor. A good critique is a succinct evaluation describing the reasons for the judge's placements in a specific competition. For example, the rationale is evident in this excerpt from a recent published critique of Norwich Terriers: the judge describes the 1st place dog as "cobby and compact with a beautifully balanced outline ... well boned, lovely deep well-ribbed body with nice tight elbows, level topline and well set on tail ... moved out true both ways with a free and easy gait with good parallel rear movement." The description of the 2nd place dog sheds more light on the judge's thought process and the features desired: it says, in part, "pleasing size just slightly longer cast than the winner so not quite so compact looking ... he moved out with good drive from behind, just a touch wide in front coming on."

Dog show judging, we know, is subjective; but I believe that critiques can improve the quality of judging. It's not enough to place dogs simply because one exhibits looks better than another without being able to explain why. A judge who is required to provide rationale for his rankings is more likely to be prepared (know the breed standard) and on his toes when judging (that is, find the entry who best meets the ideal described by the breed standard). Some features, such as a correct bite, are easy to evaluate. Other features require understanding of the canine skeletal anatomy and musculature, and the features that define the ideal Norwich Terrier.

The competent judge evaluates the whole dog and is not fooled by clever trimming to flatten shoulders, raise a low tailset, fill in a dippy topline, etc. Nor is the competent judge fooled by the handler who races around the ring or applies a taut lead to conceal her exhibit's faulty structure. We are discouraged when a judge rewards the dog with obvious faults, in favor of so-called "showmanship". A critique would compel a judge to be methodical and complete. He would need to apply the breed standard (not just memorize it to pass a test) and recognize the Norwich Terrier that is most typical of the breed. If judges actually had to explain why they made their choices, I believe we would have more forthright judging. Over time we might notice trends, good and bad. Critiques would inform breeders and exhibitors and help us to preserve and advance our breed.

There is a downside for judges in the United States. Writing critiques is more work, and the current time constraints are significant. An experienced AKC judge is expected to judge 25 dogs per hour, and up to 175 dogs for the day. Requiring critiques for the 1st and 2nd placements seems reasonable, and with a small recording device would take little time compared to the value added, assuming the critique is well-written. A poorly written critique will be of little value. Also, the judge can only describe what is shown that day, so the reader might not fully know what emphasis the judge placed on certain qualities. That said, the pros outweigh the cons. How often do we wonder why a judge placed the dogs in a certain order? We should know the judge's rationale. After all, showing dogs is an expensive undertaking – time and money – and exhibitors deserve value.

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