Issue Analysis: Conformation Shows – More Than Just a Pretty Face

Have you ever wondered why a poodle has such an interesting haircut? It's an inevitable ques-tion for many dog show spectators. Contrary to popular belief, it's not the artistic whim of the dog's handler or groomer, but rather a cut dating back centuries that helps the poodle be a better swimmer.

© AKC/ROBERT YOUNG

The word "poodle" likely originates from the German word *pudel*, meaning "to splash in the water". Poodles are excellent swimmers. Their original purpose was as a hunting dog that would retrieve birds in the water. Owners would shear portions of their coat to help facilitate movement in the water, but leave sections of their fur around the top of their head, their ankles, and hips to help them stay warm in cold water.

Facts such as these help illuminate what an AKC conformation dog show is all about. The shows highlight the amazing diversity of purebred dogs and the broad variety of tasks they can perform.

"Dog shows highlight the amazing diversity of purebred dogs and the broad variety of tasks they can perform."

Understanding Conformation Shows

The purpose of conformation shows is simple – to determine how well dogs conform to the established breed standard. In this way, dog shows are not unlike horse shows or other animal stock shows, where there is intense competition among breeders to prove both the quality of an animal and that it possesses the temperament and physical characteristics required to perform the duties for which it was bred.

Because conformation dog shows ultimately judge the quality of breeding stock, the AKC requires that all dogs competing in these shows be intact (not spayed/neutered). If a dog cannot be bred, it cannot participate in a conformation show. A dog show celebrates and rewards high-quality breeding, while substandard breeding and quality either receive poor marks or are disqualified.

In an all-breed show such as the AKC National Championship or the Westminster Kennel Club show, the competition begins with the judging of each individual breed. The winners of each breed advance to their *group* competition. AKC breeds are divided into seven groups (Terrier, Sporting, Hounds, Non-Sporting, Working, Herding, and Toys) based on recognized breed characteristics and the purpose for which they were originally developed (For example, a Beagle is a member of the Hound Group and a St. Bernard is a member of the Working Group). The seven dogs that win group competition then go on to compete for Best in Show.

Points are awarded based on the number of dogs the winner of each breed competition defeats and the number of competitors in the show. A *Champion* (Ch.) title is obtained once a dog obtains a certain number of points (wins) from a required number and type of shows.

A Noble Tradition

The exhibition of dogs is a sport with a long, proud heritage. The sport as we know it today has many of its roots in Victorian England, where in the 19th Century, aristocratic English gentlemen would gather together at local public houses and taverns and proudly exhibit their dogs. The first organized dog show as we know them today was held in Newcastle-on-Tyne in 1859. According to The Kennel Club (UK), 60 Pointer and Setter breeds were entered in this first show[1].

The popularity of the sport continued to expand (as did the number of breeds included), and dog shows began in the United States just after the Civil War. In 1877, Queen Victoria entered a Scottish Deerhound at the first Westminster Kennel Club dog show at Gilmore's Garden (now Madison Square Garden) in New York City.

Even as the sport expanded, special care was taken to ensure the quality of the dogs and that proper, safe breeding was main-

[1] "History of the Kennel Club", The Kennel Club. http://www.thekennelclub.co.uk/item/343/

BLOODHOUND- ©ANIMAL PLANET

tained. Major James M. Taylor, the first President of the American Kennel Club, emphasized the need for a standard set of rules. The AKC maintains a strict set of rules governing AKC dog shows to this day.

In addition, the breed parent club of each breed recognized by the American Kennel Club maintains a very specific breed standard to ensure the quality of the dogs and preservation of the characteristics that enable them to perform the tasks for which they were originally bred. Only a breed parent club can alter a breed standard.

"The competitive aspect encourages the breeding and raising of better dogs and better pets."

Outside the Ring

Participation in conformation dog shows requires an extensive amount of work, travel, and an immense depth of expertise in the breed being shown. Dog shows are one of the few events in which professionals and amateurs regularly compete directly with one another. These exhibitors, regardless of whether they are professional handlers or owner-handlers, ensure that their dogs are in the best health, of the best quality, and exemplify the best of their breed.

Dog show exhibitors are also excellent resources for spectators who are considering purchasing a dog. Most are breed experts and once they are finished showing for the day, are happy to talk about their dog's breed, temperament, and care requirements.

Purebred dogs benefit from dog shows, too. Shows are not only fun, they also provide a level of accountability for competitors to make sure their dogs are properly bred and raised. The competitive aspect encourages the breeding and raising of better dogs and better pets. They are also educational opportunities for competitors and spectators alike to learn about the various AKC-registered breeds and proper dog care. Experts on dog breeding, care, health and genetics abound at dog shows.

Conformation dog shows are a fun, family-friendly way to spend time with dogs and interact with fellow dog lovers. The AKC's Junior Showmanship program reaches out to young people 9-18 years of age. Juniors competitions provide the opportunity for young people to learn about dogs, develop dog handling skills, and learn good sportsmanship.

The AKC also conducts a competitive scholarship program for Juniors who have competed in the sport. Each year, approximately 25 college scholarships are awarded. Applicants must provide details about their experience in the sport, work they have done in the community in support of responsible dog ownership, and an essay on the influence that purebred dogs have had on their lives.

It Pays to Support AKC Dog Shows!

The American Kennel Club hosted its first dog show in Philadelphia in 1926 in conjunction with the celebration of the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Declaration of Independence. Since that time, the popularity of dogs and dog shows has grown exponentially in the United States.

Each year, thousands of AKC conformation dog shows take place in communities in every state. Local clubs and organizations also host thousands of additional AKC obedience, agility, field trial, and other competitions throughout the country.

Each of these events generates significant revenue for local businesses including hotels, restaurants, shops, transportation, and event venues, among others.

This revenue is in addition to the millions of dollars responsible dog owners spend on their pets at local businesses each year on such items as dog food, grooming, veterinary care and boarding.

When considering whether to support a piece of canine legislation, consider the effect it may have on dog competitions and dog ownership among your constituency. Supporting dog shows and responsible dog ownership has a ripple effect that benefits a community's residents, local businesses, and overall economy.

For more information about the economic impact of AKC shows and dog ownership in your state, visit www.akcgr.org.

Dogs have made a positive impact on the lives of millions of Americans. Conformation shows are a fun way to celebrate some of the most exquisite dogs in the world, the dedication of their breeders, and the wonderful purpose and characteristics that make each AKC-registered breed unique.