

Officiating and Instant replay

By: Walter Sommerfelt

I am one of those baby boomer kids that grew up in the 50's and 60's in a working-class neighborhood in the Polish section of Cleveland, Ohio. My father was a decorated World War II veteran that served in the European theater under Eisenhower. Following the war in 1946 Mom and Dad got married and over the next 50 plus years they raised 5 children born in 1951, 54, 60, 63, & 66. When I was young Dad worked two jobs and my mother was a typical stay at home mom. We lived upstairs above my grandparents in a small apartment filled with love.

It was a great time to be a kid. We didn't have much, but we never really gave it much thought.

Mom and dad were good Catholics (in fact two of my aunts were nuns) so we were sentenced to 12 years of Catholic School and had a pretty normal childhood. What I remember most about growing up was that almost all my friends and the other kids in the neighborhood were always outside playing some type of sports or getting into mischief. On most days' baseball, touch and tackle football, basketball, kickball, and whatever else we could play with the number of kids available occupied our free time. My brother and I had paper routes to earn spending money and we walked everywhere except for those times when we would take a bus to go fishing on Lake Erie or downtown to attend a Cleveland Indians game when you could buy a general admission ticket for \$.75.

I remember that when I joined the little league, the team that I wanted to play for had tryouts and you had to earn your place on the team. I was not a natural athlete and had to work hard in order to make the team roster. There were no guarantees of playing time, but you practiced a lot and in my case on a rare occasion I got into a game or two. Just like with almost all sports competition we had umpires, some good, some bad, and most were just volunteers trying their best. There were obviously moments with arguments over calls but when the game was over, we lined up and shook hands with the other team and went home or for ice cream after a win. In professional sports now I believe hockey is the only sport that still lines up and shakes hands with the opponent following every game.

When we would play sandlot style sports with our friends, we figured out ways to officiate in our own way and it pretty much worked without too many fisticuffs. Usually it was the biggest kid or the one that brought the equipment that won the disputes, but we had fun.

In those days, we only had three TV channels (and most of us only had black and white) no internet, or video games. We did have pinball and bowling and they were great to play against your friends especially in the cold winter months. In our neighborhood sports were just one of the better outlets for most of us. We followed our favorite local teams, the Cleveland Indians

and Browns, Cleveland Baron's Hockey, wrestling, and Ohio State football either on the radio or through the newspapers. As a kid life was good. TV began expanding, we would catch an occasional sports event on TV. The World Series, College football's game of the week, the Olympics and of course ABC's Wide World of Sports. Being able to watch live sports was not like today where you have it 24/7/365 on cable. It was a treat especially when officials made those critical calls that at times had a major impact on the outcome of the games. It was a hoot to watch Billy Martin and Earl Weaver argue with the umpires spitting, kicking up dirt and complaining about a call, or watching Woody Hayes have a sideline temper tantrum and Bobby Knight throwing chairs across the court. Following the tantrums, the crowd would erupt when the officials would flag them or eject them from the game. When we got to high school organized football, Basketball, Baseball, Track, and other sports introduced us to paid, well trained and sanctioned officials' which also often-made disputed calls. We learned to understand that these people were human and trying their best, and even if they were wrong the call was final, so you better accept it.

Through the year's technology continued improving and now when you watch a sporting event, especially a college or professional one, there are numerous cameras spread around throughout the venue giving us every possible angle to see the plays. With all these cameras and angles many sports adopted "instant replay." Challenges to human calls made by the officials were now added to the landscape. Just look at this past year's Kentucky Derby where the winner was Disqualified for interference. In those sports that have adopted it the reviews allow for the overturning of the call on the field. As a result, many of the officials in those sports also have review committees that evaluate them and can fine, suspend and even terminate them if they do not perform up to an acceptable standard. I just read in the paper where there is a debate in major league baseball about having a computerized robot serve behind the plate to call balls and strikes. Are we all so hung up on winning and losing that we have lost sight of the spirit of sportsmanship and fair play? The human element has always been a part of our sports culture. Officials are human; they make instant split-second decisions based on what they see and how they interpret the rules. Don't take this the wrong way but I do see the value in the replay system in some sports and I think it does work especially in the major sports. But there are a lot of sports where implementing it would forever change those sports. Gymnastics, figure skating, competitive cheer and dance are just examples of events where the judge's interpretation of the event is significant, and they score accordingly. The scoring by judges has long been an area of controversy in the international sports world and was especially talked about during the cold war years. But the great thing about sports is that with all its warts and imperfections it still thrives all over the world.

Here in the sport of pure-bred dogs officiating also has always been and will always be an area of controversy. It is not only in the conformation world but also in every type of competitive events from obedience, agility, flyball, dock diving, and any other competition where there is a

person or person's doing the judging or evaluating. Some obedience judges are known to be more lenient than others, Similarly for agility and other venues. Every aspect has rules and guidelines, but the judges all can apply them as they see fit within the established rules.

In the conformation world, the judges also are officiating within a set of guidelines. They are interpreting the written standard for the breed and how, at that moment and under those conditions, they see the exhibits in front of them. There is a lot that goes into that judge processing what they see and feel in the ring and between the competitors in each class. The judge does not have the ability to see the exhibit in an environment like a back yard where the dog without a lead looks fantastic and moves like a dream. Or standing in a perfect natural pose without any outside help. He or she makes the decision based on a limited time frame in which the human counterpart the handler presents the exhibit to him hopefully to its best advantage.

Having stood in the middle for the past 34 years I can tell you that is not always a simple task. I believe all judges try to do the very best job they can. We unfortunately do not have the use of an instant replay or even the time it would take to go back and review what we have seen presented to us. Even if we did have instant replay how would it help? How many cameras would we need? How many angles would we see? Could the camera pick up things like dentition, eye shape and color, muscle tone, coat color and texture, and so many other things that are included in the standard for the breed?

Often, judges will ask someone to move their dog again sometimes because they can see that the handler does not have the best control and they are not seeing what their hands have told them to expect. At the same time what judges see in the stack is not being presented properly. There are so many variables in the judging process and all judges have their own views, preferences, and various levels of how much importance is placed on the different areas of the standard.

Like the officials in the sports world, dog judges are also subjected to training and evaluation by the American Kennel Club. Some judges are outstanding in some breeds and lacking in others, while some are above average and some below average in all the breeds, they officiate in. But one thing all judges and any type of official have in common is that they are all human, and no human is perfect.

When exhibiting please remember that judges are human beings making "at that moment" decisions. Those choices have been formed through their training and interpretation. You may not agree and maybe that video you took with your phone will support your view or that of the judge but, either way, the decision is final, and we must accept it and move on. I, for one, could not imagine using instant replay in our sport.

I understand the frustration of exhibitors. You have spent your time, money and hours of training and conditioning preparing for your moments in the ring and you're not happy with the outcome. But you are no different than the gymnast, figure skater, Drill Team, Cheer Team, or any person that competes. All competitors train, travel, exert time and expense to compete in

what they enjoy. Have you ever looked at how much time and money many individuals spend to just compete in some amateur and Olympic events? Or how many hours high school, college, amateur and professional teams spend in training and practice? Even with all that practice not all teams reach a high level of success and it's not for lack of trying.

If you're one of those exhibitors that simply cannot enjoy our sport for what it is than maybe its time to look for something else. But, if you can accept your wins and losses, learn to be objective, practice to improve your dogs and your skills you will be able to enjoy a sport filled with many friends and great experiences. Special moments between you and that dog that is hopefully your best friend are very exciting. Remember that no matter what the outcome of the day your dog loves you unconditionally and that alone makes it all worthwhile.