

## **One person's look at the current and future state of our sport:**

By Walter J. Sommerfelt

Do you ever find yourself thinking about our sport of pure-bred dogs? Are you like some that wonder out loud whether will we even have a sport 10-20 years from now? Are you new to the sport and wonder what people mean when they say the good old day? Do you remember those days when judges were respected and were known to have a great background in the sport? Are you a breeder that truly cares about your breed and can not believe how "generic" it has become? If you answered yes to any of these and have several more of your own, I wonder what we all can do together to make our sport what it once was.

As I pondered some of these questions, I decided to just jot down some of my thoughts on a variety of subjects that concern me about our sport today.

It is really no secret that conformation show entries in the U.S are in decline on a per show basis. It is also no secret that the animal right groups and lobbyist are creating problems for those dedicated purebred dog breeders throughout our country.

Reasons abound from everywhere about the cause of these issues and what can be done to reverse the trend.

I do not believe there is one single issue that has caused any of what we see in the dog world today. What I see is we live in a world where the technological advancements of the past 25 years have changed our world in ways none of us could have predicted back in the 70's and moving forward.

Cell Phones, the internet, Facebook, twitter and so forth now allow people to share their thoughts both positive and negative almost instantly with not only their friends and family but with literally the whole world. The people doing this in most cases are not even considering the consequences of their actions nor caring whom may be hurt by them. Fifty years ago an unhappy exhibitor might share his or her frustrations of the day with those closest to them or through a phone call to a friend and within a day or two the frustrations would be forgotten and the unhappy exhibitor may or may not choose to enter under that judge or attend that specific show in the future.

Where today they instantly post about their perception of a judge lacking knowledge, not being friendly enough, only placing professional handlers or friends and the like. They also don't like the rules that clubs, and venues have in place for safety and other reasons that they don't agree with. Often many of these individuals are people that have been in the sport a relatively short time and have not taken the time or expended the effort to study and learn about their breed, what is proper movement, conditioning and presentation for their breed. They also often don't belong to a club and do not know of all the volunteers and hard work that goes into putting on a show. Many are instant experts and have no problem letting everyone know it. There are I will

admit occasions when the criticism is valid and deserved but the way they go about trashing people, judges, clubs and fellow exhibitors is uncalled for.

In my humble opinion the American Kennel Club is responsible for some of these issues most notably the rapid advancement of today's newer judges. I originally applied to judge back in 1985. At that time, we were required to provide a long and verifiable background as an exhibitor, and successful breeder of the breed or breeds we were initially applying for. We took closed book tests, had interviews and in some cases "Hands on Tests" from our peers on our ability to evaluate the exhibits in front of us. After approval we did our provisional assignments before being granted full status. On the following application you could apply for the same number of breeds for which you were initially approved. Example with one breed you could apply for one, two for two and so on with a maximum number per application. This was a process, that although time consuming and often frustrating made the newer judges really spend time gaining knowledge and valuable experience as they progressed through the process. Today a new judge can apply for up to twelve breeds on the next application. From one to twelve is a huge leap and makes no sense to most of us. There were of course many adjustments to the system some good, some bad, and many controversial. Then a few years ago the board under the guidance of Ron Menaker and the Late Steve Gladstone passed the program I like to call "the no judge left behind program" opening the floodgates to judges being granted double digit breed approvals by simply checking the boxes as they say. This program has led to many of our newer judges being in over the heads.

Although the old system was slow and tedious it did work in generating judges that were more prepared in the "breed specific" traits of the breeds they acquired. I personally did not apply under the Menaker/Gladstone system and thought it to be a very poor way to advance judges. I have always felt that once a judge had been through the old system there should be a point where they should than be allowed to proceed more rapidly based on their display of good judgement and experience over time. Most judges spend a great deal of time at shows when not in the ring watching, learning, and discussing many of the breeds they do not currently judge. In my opinion if a judge is approved for two or more groups and already has a track record of five to ten years of quality judging experience, they should be allowed to request an entire group by just taking the tests for the breeds and proceed. The reality is that you really don't totally grasp the breed until you can put your hands on and judge them. Once granted the new group they should than be required to judge the new breeds a certain amount of times with at least one year before they could request another group. It could be a simple procedure where the judge sends in a request to apply for the specific group and the AKC says yes or no based on the judges past performance in those breeds for which he or she is already approved. If the AKC says no to the requesting judge they should provide him or her the reasons for their decision. The judge should than be given the opportunity to request observations of the breeds they are currently approved for and after receiving a certain number of positive reviews allowed to request again to proceed or be told that they have reached their limit for the foreseeable future.

I also believe judges should be encouraged to continue to breed and exhibit. As one of those judges that continues to breed and exhibit, I know from experience that it keeps me in touch with the not only the sport in general but also all of the aspects that go into the preparation for the exhibitor, the costs, the time and effort of grooming and conditioning, the joys and frustrations of the whelping box, the raising of puppies, the hard work and anticipation going into each prospect as well as the behavior “good and bad” of the judges and other exhibitors. Continuing to exhibit reminds you what it feels like to be treated rudely while it can also remind you if one is honest with oneself to know when you have won when maybe you should not have and also when you have lost when you clearly should have won. This hopefully keeps you focused on honest and fair evaluations of all exhibits in your ring and the ability to judge them “On the day.”

Judging approvals and advancement is just one area that really needs improvement. The next and maybe to most important one for survival rests in using shows to present our sport to the public and enhance the perception of our sport.

When I began almost all clubs held two “One Day” shows in a year within their local territories. This gave the club two opportunities a year to share the sport with their friends, neighbors, and other people in the community that might be interested in learning about pure bred dogs. Clubs also held sanctioned matches where not only newcomers, but seasoned dog people would take their prospects to train and evaluate them while preparing them for the show ring. The matches also allowed prospective individuals to try their hand at judging to get a feel for the process, ring procedure and to gain hands on knowledge of those breeds they were judging that day. Match and Sweepstakes judging were part of the requirements in applying to start a judging career.

In the 1970’s a gas crisis occurred in our country. As a result, the AKC began to allow clubs to hold two shows together and to also “cluster” into longer weekends if the new venue to be used was considered “exceptional”. It was at this time our sport started to undergo change. The number of exceptional venues was limited but the number of clusters that started began to increase as in some cases two, three, or four clubs would get together to hold a cluster at one site. These initially proved to be very successful as exhibitors no longer had to pack up and move from site to site for the next show. While in the past most weekends were simply a Saturday and Sunday events that the average working person could attend with their family the new clusters were adding Fridays and in some cases Thursdays to the weekend. Some of the working people would use vacation days to attend the occasional Friday shows and some Thursday shows but as clusters grew so also did the use of what at the time were called agents. At one time the AKC licensed professional handlers, these were individuals with Kennels and were dedicated knowledgeable people that AKC not only inspected but just as with judges controlled which breeds, they were approved to exhibit. They provided their clients with Rate cards and the clients knew in advance what their costs etc. would be. Also, back in those days we did not have the number of publications as we do now promoting the top dogs. Most handlers and exhibitors always showed within a specific area and the competition within various breeds was often between the same exhibitors show after show and many bonds and friendships were formed because people truly cared about their breeds and preserving and promoting them. Following breed judging often little picnics and many discussions among fellow breed exhibitors took place

with many staying to cheer on the breed winner of the day in the group. These were fun times and many a lifetime of friendship were built. Conversations between judges and exhibitors were commonplace and considered great learning opportunities with no one questioning integrity and impropriety.

AKC eventually dropped the licensing of professional handlers and the new term was agents. Many of these individuals did not have kennel set ups and were no longer under the direct supervision of the AKC. Basically, they were free to charge whatever was agreed upon between themselves and the clients. Some were very qualified while others were using it to supplement their income from a regular Monday through Friday job. As more and more clusters grew into three- and four-day weekends more and more RV's started to appear, and venues now had to deal with providing parking for these vehicles and the Electric to maintain them. To be considered "exceptional" numerous venues were starting to supply indoor locations with heat and Air conditioning as well as electrical outlets for grooming. These changes eventually led to a decline in outdoor shows with tenting and many of the smaller fairgrounds that most clubs were using. These exceptional venues also caused an increase in costs to the clubs which of course were passed on to the exhibitors in rising entry fees.

The most dramatic and damaging change caused by clusters was the eventual move of many clubs from holding shows within their own community and now showing in the new cluster locale. Clubs joined together to form cluster mainly for financial reasons to share the venue as well as the cost of judges and give the exhibitors and handlers what they wanted. Initially there were not a very large number of three and four day clusters, however over time these expanded to many less than exceptional venues and the number of clusters grew to where there are now several 4-5 day clusters on the same weekend throughout the country and we now have very few 2 day weekend stand alone shows remaining. In the 1970's almost every show had over 1000 dogs while some clusters had between 2000-3000 dogs a quick look now shows many of these cluster now with entries of between 500-1000 with an average of around 800 why is that?

The main reason is there are now a lot of shows on any given weekend. Most of these shows are attended by professionals as the average person is working on Thursday and Friday and many don't want to attend if they can't do the entire circuit. It is also known that over time club leadership changes and clubs that once partnered together may now have individuals that don't work together for any number of reasons including a declining membership due to aging. These leadership changes have caused many clusters to deal with break ups or difficulties in the clubs working together.

Clusters have also taken the shows out of the club's home territory thus eliminating an opportunity to showcase our sport to that community. To verify this one only needs to look at the number of shows being held in Springfield, MA, Purina Farms in St. Louis and a few other select venues around the country. Those clubs that choose to remain in their territory are often faced with tight financial budgets, somewhat limited available venues and definite limits on the judge pool available to fit their needs.

I would like to see the AKC become proactive in getting clubs to go back to their hometowns and provide their communities the opportunity to share in our wonderful world of purebred dogs. I propose that the AKC allow any "Member" club that keeps their show in the home territory to be approved for a "Three Day" weekend of shows. The benefits to the club and community are plentiful. First it allows the club to manage its own show and its own weekend without worrying about the other club involved. Second it could return larger entries as now local working exhibitors may take the one vacation day to attend. Costs of judges would be managed more efficiently by dividing expenses by 3 vs 2. The extra day provides the club the opportunity to invite schools, nursing homes and other groups to attend the Friday show as a field trip. It can also give the club an opportunity to provide other items of community interest like "meet the breeds", GCG, Trick dog test, my dog can do that, and other events on one of the three days especially if space is limited. It might also provide for some type of social event that could be used as a fund raiser for a local charity. As the founder and coordinator for the former St. Jude Showcase of dogs. I can attest first-hand the positive publicity that can be generated in the community. During those years hundreds of thousands of dollars were raised for the hospital. As the chairman and of course a volunteer receiving no compensation I would on occasion receive calls from public officials about possible canine legislation coming up in the community. Because of our positive perception in the community we were always able to have an influence in preventing it. Within two years of the events stoppage legislation was passed. Now living here in Knoxville and currently serving as President my club, The Tennessee Valley Kennel Club has donated to the local Children's Hospital, The Methodist Hospital Senior Care unit, The University of Tennessee Veterinary School Scholarship fund as well as holding a Stuffed toy collection drive at our show for the children's hospital patients. We have also made donations to Take the lead, The Canine Health Foundation, and Make-a Wish, as well as other local charities. However, when our four-day cluster broke up our donations were greatly reduced. Being able to provide special events during and after the shows allowed us opportunities to support charities in our community. With only two days these efforts are more difficult.

More and more clubs are starting to fail for a variety of reasons and that may not be a bad thing in the long run. Some of these clubs were only formed to create cluster partners for sister clubs in the area. Some clubs have an aging membership and very few people willing to do the work. Volunteerism seems to be on the decline everywhere as the new trend is all about what can you do for me not what can I do to help? There are also clubs that have buried their heads in the sand with regards to working with and developing more interest in the performance side of our sport. We all need to look deeply into the many issues that face our future. At the Tennessee Valley Kennel Club, we have taken a pro-active approach to being open to all dog people and not just conformation driven individuals. This approach has allowed us to not only grow slightly but increase our monthly meeting attendance to 25-40 individuals per month while just 10 short years ago having a regular quorum was difficult.

It was not all that long ago the AKC made an allowance for the "All-American Dog" (Mixed breed) to start competing in AKC performance events. I do not think this was a bad policy if the intent was to encourage the people to eventually get a pure-bred dog. However, in my opinion the AKC needs to review the current policy on the "All-American dog". I think it's great that it

gets an individual to participate in our events, but it does not enhance the mission of promoting the pure-bred dog. Those individuals that participate with the all-American dog should have some type of limit on the number of all-American dogs they can exhibit. For example, they can complete with up to two dogs but if they wish to continue in AKC events dog number three and going forward must be an AKC registered pure bred dog. After all our mission is pure-bred dogs.

AKC was proud to announce that they will again have a meet the breeds weekend at the Javits center in New York City. This is great for the exposure of our sport in that great city. But what about the rest of the country? Maybe the AKC could commission the creation of one or two travelling exhibits on a tractor trailer rig that would go to the various shows throughout the country with an interactive exhibit designed for the general public showcasing all we have to offer in the purebred world. They could work with the local clubs for meet the breeds, some demonstrations, maybe have a small museum of the dog exhibit and a variety of different interests included for the public to visit. It could also be used between shows in Parking lots at large malls or pet supply stores to promote our sport.

As someone that has been involved in our sport for nearly a half of century as an exhibitor, breeder, handler, judge, show and cluster chair, Club President and officer these are just my opinions of the current state of our sport. As I mentioned at the start my hope is that we are still here as a sport long after I am gone for in my opinion there are very few things in life as special as the bond between man and his best friend our dogs. Lets all work together to promote the wonderful sport of the pure-bred dog.