

VOLUNTEERS the backbone of our sport

By Walter J. Sommerfelt

Much is often written and discussed about this great sport and our world of pure-bred dogs. These discussions range from Judges, to breed Standards, to the rules and regulations, to the top dogs, professional and owner handlers, and of course the American Kennel Club itself.

What is rarely discussed or considered outside of the delegate body is the important role of the Local Kennel Club and the numerous volunteers it takes to keep them operating and providing quality competitive shows and trials for dog loving enthusiasts to compete in.

Just think about for a minute. If there were no clubs would we still have shows and trials? Could clubs survive and thrive if they had to pay everyone that worked to put on their show? Would the AKC step in and start putting on the shows by themselves? I think not. There is no doubt in my mind that the many Volunteers throughout our country and the club they represent are truly the life blood of the sport.

Now I ask you, Are you a Contributing volunteer member of your local kennel club? Or are you one of those people that just take for granted that everything will be done, and you do not need to give back or contribute to your local kennel club and the sport in general.

Volunteerism is generally considered an altruistic activity where an individual or group provides service for no financial or social gain but rather to “benefit another person, group, or organization.”

When I first started in the sport, I was very fortunate to have mentors that guided me to membership in my first All-Breed and breed specific clubs. Fortunately for me that first club was the Western Reserve Kennel Club in Cleveland, Ohio. In the early 1970's it was considered one of the premier clubs in the country and hosted two of our largest shows, one in the Summer at the Metropolitan Polo Field and one in Downtown Cleveland in December at the Convention center. I learned so much by belonging to the club. WRKC was at that time comprised of a membership with many of the Icons in the sport at that time. The club was a huge presence in the Greater Cleveland area and also made significant contributions to

the Cleveland Public Library system with donations of a huge numbers of canine related books as well as housing a complete library of the various stud books from not only AKC but many other registries throughout the world. Back before the internet, if one chose, he could go to the library and research those stud books to build a pedigree going back as many generations as one wished to search. It was a club filled with great breeders, exhibitors, judges, and handlers. The meetings were held in downtown Cleveland at the YMCA right next to the old Cleveland Arena and the meetings were always well attended and thanks to the efforts of the late Max Riddle and others we always had interesting and educational programs on a monthly basis.

Part of your responsibilities as a member of this great organization was that you were expected to volunteer and work at the two shows put on by the club. We were introduced to the concept that throughout the year you attended shows put on by other clubs and giving up showing at the local shows was your way of “giving back” to the sport. Volunteering was just a small part of the big picture of helping our sport to continue to grow and succeed.

Throughout my career in this sport I have never lost sight of the concepts I was taught by the WRKC. Serving in some type of capacity at the local club level has always been a part of my life in every place I have ever lived. Throughout that time what I have observed is a tremendous change in attitude amongst the many people involved in our sport. While a great number of today’s exhibitors, judges and handlers will not join a club. These individuals are often amongst the first to complain about the judging panel, the venue, the parking, and a multitude of issues without ever considering the fact that the show is being put on for their enjoyment by a number of VOLUNTEERS that are not being compensated in any way for all they do to make it happen.

It is very important to never forget that shows are put on and worked by unpaid volunteers. These individuals take time away from their families, their jobs and other interests to provide shows and trials for all of us to participate in. we all need to be thankful for these individuals and all they do for us.

In my capacity as a judge I have on occasion been embarrassed by the treatment of various club officials by some of my colleague judges who complained about situations and issues that made them unhappy. In my experience most clubs try to do their best to be sure the judges, as well as all exhibitors needs are met. It Is also true that those clubs with memberships that include judges generally are a little

more in tune with what makes for a good experience for the judges. Most judges just want a good line of communication, a nice clean hotel in a respectable area with hopefully an in-house restaurant and simple transportation to and from the airport and to the show grounds. There are occasions when we will encounter a club volunteer that has accepted the responsibility and has had no assistance or guidance in dealing with the care of the judges, and through no fault of their own or just trying to stay within a clubs guideline budget put judges in a less than ideal situation. It would be helpful for a club to remember that the judges are at their mercy and are not familiar with the area. In many cases they do not have the transportation available to allow them any flexibility. When in those situations that are less than ideal, I always try to remember that they are volunteers and thank them for their efforts and when the time is right suggest a possible change to them for the future.

In my opinion some of my fellow judges need to remember there is a huge list of available judges for any club to hire and we as judges should be grateful to those that thought highly enough of us to invite us. We need to show respect to the clubs' volunteers as well as the exhibitors at the show. We as judges also need to remember that we are just one part of the show and appreciate the privilege to officiate there. If one is truly unhappy with the experience, he or she should just make a note of it to themselves and politely decline an invitation from that club in the future. There is no reason to be rude or disrespectful to any club member or volunteer.

Having also been a show and cluster chair it continues to amaze me how rude todays exhibitors and handlers can be to members of the show committee. In my opinion the two toughest jobs at any show are parking and trying to control the grooming area. It seems that to many people the entry fee entitles them to park where they want, leave vehicles in the unloading areas for extended periods of time, try to take as much space as possible in the grooming area and save space for their friends regardless of what is published in the premium list. I have observed people trying to get into buildings before the designated day or time, Refuse to stack crates, spread out as if they are entitled to however much space they want and when asked to consolidate and be considerate they berate the club volunteer who is just trying to help everyone have an enjoyable day at the show.

We all know it does not stop at just these few instances, but it is rather an ongoing sense of entitlement and bad behavior by exhibitors and handlers that has caused some members to simply quit the club and the sport.

The Late President George Bush used his “thousand points of light” initiative to show America the value of the VOLUNTEER in our society. He wanted everyone to understand the value in volunteerism and giving back.

Earlier in this article I asked, are you a working volunteer member of your local kennel club? If your answer was NO my next question is why not? I am not naïve, and I know that personalities and other issues exist in many clubs, but I also know that one person can make a difference.

Being a Volunteer can be very rewarding. For many years I had the pleasure of chairing the St Jude Showcase of Dogs in Memphis, TN. It was an incredible event that truly made a difference through our donations to that wonderful institution. It was a special event and I will be the first to admit that in some cases the situations were not ideal, but they were always workable within reason. There were occasions when an exhibitor, spectator, judge and even volunteer would be upset. My standard question was, Is your issue a minor inconvenience, or a personal issue? If it either of these I will be glad to take you with me to St. Jude’s to let you meet the children that are dealing with a real problem for which this event is trying to assist. There is a huge difference between a small issue with parking, grooming, even judging and that of people dealing with issues of life, death, health and family. Please keep this in mind when dealing with the volunteers that have given so much of their time and talents to keep the show or trial going for you.

Be sure to thank all the volunteers you encounter at the show. Please “Clean Up” your area and pick up after your dog. Accept the responsibility that goes with being a good exhibitor, judge and spectator and human being. Remember if there are no volunteers there will be no shows.

And Lastly if you don’t belong to a club you need to, and you need to volunteer so we can all keep doing what we love with our dogs.