

Norwich Terriers, 11-20

Susan Miller Hall, Guest Columnist

Title: Why Show Dogs?

In these times of Covid, many exhibitors are faced with the question of whether to show or not to show their dogs. For me it's easy to decide. I'm an owner/breeder exhibitor and showing dogs is a nonessential event. In as much as my financial survival is not dependent on showing, I can't see risking one's health for show wins.

But, really why show dogs at all? There is the social aspect, the environment of a shared interest and common goals. There is the opportunity to have your dog's conformation validated by a judge expert. As a breeder, I repeat the mantra, a declared truism: I show dogs to showcase my breeding stock and to advance the results of my breeding protocol. I look for validation and an objective interpretation of our breed standard. Ric Chashoudian, an influential breeder/handler/judge, gave a great explanation of dog evaluation. To first establish that the dog possessed the "right stuff", the dog must have the basic good qualities that enable that breed to do what they were bred to do, and possessed show qualities that made them appealing to look at. They should have carriage and temperament. They must be able to move with ease. These are the necessities. Then you evaluate the parts and parcel of the dog. As a breeder, I appreciate the whole dog and the importance of evaluating the health of the breed, the temperament, the reproductive qualities – these are the things that protect and preserve the breed. The show ring should reflect all these qualities, and not the hand at the end of the lead.

Is there bias in favor of the professional handler? In Norwich terriers, breeders and owner handlers use to be more the norm in the classes. Today, professional handlers outnumber us. Winning shouldn't come down to the ability to carve and color a dog out of a pile of hair, or the ability to manipulate the lead and dog's pace to suggest correct movement. The group rings are professional handler heavy, and that may be better understood. Competition to be "number one" or ranked amongst the top in one's breed is fierce. Has the point system helped improve the quality of the dog? Or the just the opposite – have the ranking and rating systems simply served to advance the showiness and the most marketable? More concerning: Do breeders become influenced by show ring antics and accumulating points more than gaining an appreciation for breed standards?

As noted in an article in *The New York Times*, some breeders place a figure in excess of \$100,000 for campaigning certain dogs with deep pocketed backers to get their dog ready and recognized by the judges. This involves, training, grooming, and handling fees, and entry fees, cost of and travel to many, many shows. That's not all. There are bonuses to be paid for the big wins and advertising in the glossy dog magazines -- all this in addition to the initial purchase price. Competitive dogs are quickly assigned recognition in connection with their handler. "Robert's Airedale"; occasionally the owner may be acknowledged, but to the observing public unaware of kennel names, the breeder is in the small print.

A breeder's life is controlled by breeding, whelping, rearing and commitment to all that encompasses loving and caring for all stages of a dog's life. All breeders have a heart dog(s), a bed dog(s), our walking dogs, and the dogs that sit on the couch watching reruns of Law and Order during pandemics. Our therapy dogs guide us through the unsettling times, like life in times of Covid and celebrate the best of wins.

I'm sure I will continue to breed dogs long after Covid. I will continue breeding because of my concern for the health and preservation of the breed I love. But I acknowledge the show ring has lost some of its luster.