

What Price Glory: What Happens When Winning is



Nearly twenty years later, I remember baiting Shadow with an empty hand in a Best in Match ring lit only by streetlights. I ignored the crisp November air as, with one eye on the judge, I concentrated presenting my dog at his best. Australian Shepherds were not AKC recognized. Only at matches like this could they go head-to-head with the other breeds. Shadow had a shot at the top prize in one of the largest all-breed matches in our area, and I'd run out of liver half way through Working Group.

Soon we were at the head of the line. The judge examined Shadow and moved us. As we circled the ring to the end of the line, the watchers applauded. These were no semi-organized group of friends and admirers. Most the Aussie people had long since gone home. Shadow's progress was cheered by strangers who appreciated a good dog.

The judge continued with the individual exams. I kept Shadow "on," in case she glanced our way. My handsome black tri kept his gaze intent on my liverless hand. I thanked the gods of dog shows that he was an incurable food-hound.

The judge finished with the Toy Group winner then motioned us all to gait around the ring once

more. The Borzoi lead off, followed by the Pointer. I moved Shadow out, easily keeping pace with the leggier beasts while the smaller dogs scribed a narrower circle behind us. The judge held her hand overhead, watching us intently. Shadow didn't miss a beat. I hoped I wouldn't.

Her hand dropped. She was pointing to me! Shadow had won Best in Match.

Winning that show was one of the highlights of my years in conformation competition. I can relive those heady emotions a score of years later. To win, and win something big, is a wonderful experience. But it was, after all, only a dog show.

Exhibition of purebred dogs started about a century and a half ago as an outgrowth of stock shows, where breeders would exhibit their finest cattle, sheep and hogs. As with the stock shows, the intent was to showcase fine breeding stock. But over the years the emphasis has changed from providing a showcase to a major criterion for determination of "breeding quality." The old adage "breed the best to the best" has subtly changed in meaning toward breeding the best-looking to the best-looking. Success in the conformation ring has become so important that a few will subvert the process to ensure greater success.

Today, the conformation show system in the United States has spawned an entire industry. People can and do make a living producing canine competitions, handling dogs and selling a wide variety of goods and services

targeted at exhibitors. Breeders advertise major wins and publish lists of their titled dogs—too often with no mention of pedigree or health clearances. There is nothing wrong with celebrating a win or taking an opportunity to crow a little, but titles and wins, however prestigious, are not inherited by a dog's puppies.

A good judge will recognize physical quality in a dog, but due to its nature the conformation ring offers little opportunity to evaluate a dog's mental acuity and physical stamina. Even in breeds where gait is emphasized, a few laps around the ring can only point out the extremely unfit. A good breeder should be equally competent to evaluate a dog's physical attributes and shouldn't require outside opinions, in the form of show wins, to bias his judgement. In addition, the wise breeder will make an opportunity to observe and interact with dogs away from the shows to gage their mental and physical mettle.

Breed-oriented Internet discussion lists go on at length about the importance of breeding to titled, dogs, especially Champions. Special emphasis is put on pedigrees which feature the titled "greats" of the breed. Titles are the tail that wags far too many dog breeders.

Conformation shows have become an end rather than a means. People are breeding dogs to win dog shows instead of using the shows to present their breeding efforts. If a dog does not win, is it without question unworthy of breeding? If it wins a lot, should it necessarily be bred a lot? While on the surface this might seem to make sense, the reasoning is flawed.

A dog's worth as a breeding animal is dependent upon its genetic makeup. It's appearance and behavior in the ring can give an indication of its potential, but all the ribbons and trophies in the world won't help if it doesn't pass those qualities to its offspring.

In the US, considerable emphasis is placed on presentation and, in coated breeds, grooming. An inept handler or groomer can make the best dog look bad. Conversely, a talented handler or groomer can present a mediocre specimen in a manner that distracts from its weaknesses. Good handlers can school a dog with the proper temperament to exude presence: The kind of dog which makes bystanders say, "Look at him! He's asking for the win." Ring presence is at least as much nurture as nature. Is a dog that "asks for it" a better breeding candidate than the one with better structure but a less showy attitude? A dog's grooming or show presence may be a credit to the person who put the work into creating them, but they won't go with the puppies unless the breeder includes the groomer's or handler's business card along with the papers.

Winning has become so important to some people that they employ a number of practices to improve their odds of winning. Some are as simple as carefully studying judges and choosing which to exhibit a dog under. Others will alter their dogs to better conform to the standards or

the current winning fashion, taping or gluing of ears to correct the set, dyeing of coats to cover color faults, tattooing pink skin that should have been pigmented, straightening crooked teeth, surgically altering tail sets or other physical features, and a variety of other practices. All of these alterations disguise the dog's phenotype—the look that his genes gave him. In spite of this, the genes remain what they are. The prick ears, gay tail or bad bite will come out in the progeny. Unfortunately, the person who bred to the dog or bought its pup may be ignorant of the alterations and assume she is buying genes to produce what she sees in the ring.

Even when a top winner is equally outstanding as a sire, the emphasis on his wins can lead to the popular sire syndrome. No matter how good the dog, he will have a few bad genes. The wide use of a popular sire and subsequent inbreeding and linebreeding on him will increase the frequency not only of the genes everyone wants, but those they don't want as well. If a dog and his near kin are used too extensively, particularly in breeds with small populations, there may be few places to go when the unwanted genes make their presence known.

And what of the dog that doesn't win, or maybe never sees the inside of a ring? Is it, of necessity "not breeding quality?" Dogs are as individual as people. Some do not like shows and will not show well. If the animal is in other respects an excellent example of the breed, why pass it by? What of the bitch scarred by some accident, precluding her from any chance at a win? That scar or injury won't be inherited. If she's a good quality, why not breed her? Occasionally a fine animal will belong to someone who hasn't ever shown it and doesn't want to. In most cases, such dogs will belong to people who acquired them as pets. Pet

status is not synonymous with poor quality. A knowledgeable breeder who knows the dog's pedigree background and how it's near relatives have produced may be able to make excellent use of that dog in his breeding program.

The relative success of any two dogs in the ring has no dependable correlation with their success as breeding animals. The big winner can be a dud stud while the dog with a more modest competitive record may throw marvelous puppies. The youngster who seems to be winning everything and has thrown puppies with promise is a greater gamble than the mature dog with a less stellar career. You will know what that older dog is and probably what he has produced, but a few years down the line that big-winning wunderkind could mature into mediocrity or develops a late-onset hereditary disease.

Winning is great fun and it doesn't come easy. Those who are successful deserve to be congratulated for their efforts. But those wins should never be a prime consideration when making breeding decisions. What that winner is, what he does and what he produces outside the ring are far more important to breeding than even the highest titles or top honors from the most prestigious events.

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