



CONFORMATION CONVERSATIONS

BY DEBORAH BLAIR

THE ETHICS OF DOG SHOWS – Are Clearances Relevant?

Before we get started, I invite you to open your browser and Google the following question: “What is the purpose of AKC dog shows?”

The first hit should be from the AKC itself. You remember the American Kennel Club, right? They are the organization that sponsors and oversees everything to do with their shows, so it makes sense they would know why they’re doing it.

Just in case you don’t have a computer handy, here is their answer (from www.akc.org).

“Conformation” is the official name for “dog shows.” While they may seem glamorous, the true purpose of conformation showing is to evaluate breeding stock. The dog’s conformation — his overall appearance and structure — is an indication of the dog’s ability to produce quality purebred puppies, and that is what is being judged in the ring. That’s why mixed-breeds and spayed or neutered purebreds are not eligible to compete. Many times a new exhibitor will get started in dog shows by finding a mentor, usually the breeder they acquired their puppy from. Many AKC clubs also offer handling classes to teach owners how to present their purebred dog to a judge at a dog show.

I’m not sure it can be stated any more clearly, but just to summarize the relevant points:

1. The purpose of conformation is to evaluate breeding stock.
2. A dog’s conformation is considered an indication of its ability to produce quality puppies.
3. Spayed and neutered dogs are not eligible to compete because they cannot produce puppies.

I knew this in a generic sort of way

but honestly had never read the official statement until I started thinking about this article. In fact, the whole basis of the column stemmed from the following thought: if the purpose of showing dogs

“I believe that if you knowingly show a dog in AKC conformation that will not pass one of the four basic clearances that you are doing a disservice to the breed.”

is to evaluate breeding stock, should we (as a community of people involved in having our dogs evaluated as breeding stock at AKC dog shows) only show dogs that also conform to the GRCA Code of Ethics? My mentors taught me that if a dog did not pass a clearance, you should not bother showing it. These people were actually serious about showing dogs as a tool for improving the breed. They felt that spaying or neutering and placing a dog with defective genes (or conformation or temperament, for that matter) was a kindness and would give you room to bring in a genetically sound dog to further your breeding and showing program.

Nevertheless, I personally know of dogs that have been shown, finished and specialized to the highest honors that have hip, elbow, heart and eye problems, as

well as those treated for allergies, thyroid disorders and a myriad of issues categorized in the “genetic link” category.

I do not sit in judgment over the people who show these dogs, but it begs the question: Were my mentors wrong? Does genetic soundness have nothing to do with dog shows? And if it doesn’t, has the purpose of dog shows changed?

What is the purpose of dog shows today?

Although this survey was by no means exhaustive, it seems that the reasons people show dogs have indeed changed. I asked 35 GRCA members who have been showing dogs for more than 10 years what their thoughts on clearances and showing were. The last question I asked was:

Without looking it up or being politically correct, what do you think is the purpose of dog shows in the 21st century? Why do you personally show your dogs?

Responses varied, of course, but there were several recurring themes. One that honestly surprised me is what I call, “I only came for the party.” Here are only a few sample quotes.

“Showing dogs is a hobby to me; the social part is a great part of it.”

“The purpose depends on the person. For handlers, it is a way to make money. For breeders, it is a way to show off their stock. For some, it is a social high. For me, it is the pride you feel when a dog you have bred is considered a great representation of the breed by your peers – and the socializing. Definitely the socializing!”

"I started going to dog shows because I loved beautiful dogs and was fascinated with the competition. After several decades, I still love a gorgeous dog, but I have no faith in the judges and very little respect for most of the people who consistently win. I go now because it's fun. I like the motorhome life and hanging out with other people who like dogs. Dog shows are really my whole social life, and I don't know what else I would do with my weekends."

"Dog shows are really my whole social life, and I don't know what else I would do with my weekends."

Another group of responses acknowledged that dog shows have changed but they still compete for the right reasons.

"To evaluate breeding stock. I show dogs as a competitor in a competition. I love molding and shaping a dog's mind and body. I also use shows to evaluate and promote our breeding stock."

"The purpose has changed dramatically. Most people attend dog shows to put points on their dogs. They are gone before breed is over if they don't win. They are missing the best part of dog shows and the education it provides. I personally show my dogs to put championships on their registered names. I don't think I ever showed a dog to get a judge's opinion per se, or would have been crushed if a judge didn't like that dog. I know what I have on the end of the lead and try my best to only put worthy dogs in the ring."

"First and foremost, dog shows have always been, and should continue into the future to be, the avenue to establish breeding stock in accordance with the Standard and health [guidelines], although I think we've moved away from that notion in today's world. Just like anything or any sport, ideals and purpose change with the times. I personally show dogs as I like to compete, and I enjoy the bond that is developed with a Golden being shown in conformation or agility. I grew up in the competitive horse world,

and this was a natural extension of that activity. I love and thoroughly enjoy grooming, training, exercising and then competing with my dogs in the Bred-by classes — and ultimately in Best of Breed and Groups if they do well. I also am always trying to better the breed, so attending shows and being able to watch and examine other Golden helps me in my breeding program."

"21st century dog shows are about winning. If we could do away with the Group competition it would go a long way toward fixing what is broken. People stay home nowadays. They don't witness their dogs nor do they witness the competition (temperament, structure and attitude). They are left to evaluate from photos and ads. Personally I show my own dogs because of the relationship that it fosters with them. I also RV at shows and enjoy the company and opportunity to "talk dogs" after we are through for the day. I pay close attention to the dogs at the shows and research their pedigrees."

"I think the purpose originally was to showcase breeding stock or possible breeding stock. I think that is still true, but as dogs have become part of our life, we also do it as a hobby. We love to show and we love to show our own dogs."

Sadly, but not unexpectedly, the majority of responses emphasized the lack of faith in the integrity and knowledge of judges and/or fellow competitors.

"That's a good question! It doesn't seem to be about showing your dog and having fun anymore. It seems more about he who has the most money to promote the popularity of a dog! We have stopped showing, compared to how much we used to."

"In my opinion dog shows don't seem to be that much about evaluating breeding stock anymore, but about boosting one's ego. Why else would so many people make such a big deal about their puppy finishing prior to the age of two? And how silly do they look then when that pup doesn't clear?"

"The AKC's stated purpose, in my belief, is to further purebred dogs. I showed my dogs because I loved working with them, I loved the chance to edu-

cate the public on what a well-bred Golden looked like. I do not show in conformation anymore, as the politics of the whole process has changed for the worst. Handlers fraternize with judges right before entering the ring with an exhibit to be judged by that same judge. Some handlers have stated within my hearing that, "I can finish anything." That is not the world I want to play in, or be a part of anymore."

"Right now, I am seeing it as a place where who has the bigger checkbook wins. Too much in grooming prior to going in the ring. Too much politics. I was told to plan on \$10K to finish a dog since you will need a handler if you want to win. Nothing worse than a nice dog with an owner-handler losing to a lesser quality professionally-handled dog. Some judges really shouldn't be judging. It is a very slim pickings to find a good judge who will not "have to" put up the handlers who have brought them an entry of 8 or 10 dogs."

"The idea of showing dogs to improve the breed by competition is an ideal of the past." "

"Unfortunately, I think that much of today's dog showing is ego-driven and not about the betterment of the breed. It used to be that we could go to dog shows and see excellent breeding stock. That is no longer the case. Unfortunately we have a lot of handlers finishing nothing more than mere pets due to the politics we see in today's ring. I show not only for the fun but also with hopes of obtaining a CH title for my breeding dogs and doing it on my own. I think the days of the breeder-owner-handler are numbered."

"Honestly, I think we have gotten away from the original purpose of evaluating breeding stock. Now it is a social time with a little "looking at dogs" thrown in. I show my dogs because I like showing. I like being able to say that my dogs are champions and/or have a particular performance title. And I like getting out of the house on weekends and doing something fun. I sit behind a desk all week and showing my dogs allows me

to get out, move around and get some fresh air. Would I love for shows to get back to being more honest — breeders showing good dogs and judges putting up good dogs. But people know that money can buy them just about anything, including champion dogs. Have enough money and you can find a handler that will drag your poor breed specimen to every show and eventually show it to enough of their friends that the dog finishes.”

“Ego and self gratification have become more important than the dog.”

“Ego and self-gratification have become more important than the dog. Very sad and one of the main reasons dog shows are going downhill.”

“The reason AKC still conducts shows is probably for the original intent, the evaluation of breeding stock. Today showing dogs could be for any or all of the following reasons, listed in no particular order: fun activity to participate in with your dog, income from puppy sales, ego gratification, enjoying the competition, and lastly the joy of breeding multiple generations of sound beautiful typey dogs.”

There are a dozen additional comments that all made the same point. Most of the people who responded to the survey have little faith in what dog shows have become, which pretty much negates a serious discussion about whether we should expect Golden Retrievers to have clearances when they’re in the breed ring. They were still kind enough to answer the questions, but as you’ll see it isn’t considered to be possible — even if it might be desirable.

Facts

So now we will suspend disbelief and proceed as if dog shows are actually conducted to evaluate breeding stock and that a dog’s conformation is considered an indication of its ability to pro-

duce quality puppies. The following questions were designed in an attempt to understand how seriously people take showing a dog’s conformation as an indication of being able to produce quality puppies.

How many of you feel that dogs that are two years of age or older and competing in conformation should have the four basic clearances? Survey says:

Yes, they should have clearances for hips, elbows, heart and eyes: 43%

No, there is nothing wrong showing a dog without clearances: 57%

How many of you feel that in addition to the Big Four, a dog competing in conformation should have every clearance (including thyroid, PRA and ichthyosis)? Survey says:

Yes: 9%

No: 91%

How many of you have personally shown or had a handler show a dog in conformation that had failed a clearance?

Yes, I’ve shown a dog without a clearance: 45%

No, never: 55%

Do you think that a dog that has been diagnosed and treated successfully for a disease that may be considered to have a genetic component should be shown in conformation? (Including cancer, torn cruciates, immune system disorders, etc.)

Yes: 61%

No: 22%

Maybe: 17%

Opinions

Some of the opinions really surprised me. For instance:

“I don’t think a dog without clearances should be eliminated from dog show, because not every dog that competes at shows is, or should be, bred anyway.”

We are all a sum of our experiences, and that concept is so foreign to me. If a dog shouldn’t be bred, then why would you care about showing it in a competition designed to evaluate breeding stock? You’ve seen some of the reasons, but I have to admit I still can’t wrap my mind around it.

Here’s another one that startled me:

“If we remove all the dogs that can’t get all of their clearances, then I guess it would be a handful of dogs being shown.”

Do we really have so little confidence in the genetic soundness of our breed that we don’t think there would be any dogs left? That one made me shudder, as did:

“The idea of showing dogs to improve the breed by competition is an ideal of the past. We cannot police exhibitors nor should we.”

Of course, some people had some very good points. I couldn’t deny the following:

“I don’t think this is a black-and-white area. Genetic vs. Environmental is a hard one to prove.”

“If handler or owner is just trying to wrap up a title that was almost done when the diagnosis comes in, then I see nothing wrong with it.”

“We can’t legislate what can be shown or not. Leave it to one’s peers as to how they perceive the breeder who continues to show dogs affected with genetic issues.”

And then came the few people who are much more in alignment with the actual purpose of dog shows — and to be fair, there were quite a few.

“Although some may feel the breed ring is a just a game to win, I think that the breed would be better served if people only showed the best of their breeding program that deserved to be finished and received all their health clearances. What good is a show dog without clearances that should never be bred? I look at the dogs in the ring as a potential stud dog, yet 90% of them have pedigrees with so many health issues I would never consider using them.”

“While it is nice to finish a dog, I think the original purpose of judging dogs as potential breeding stock to contribute to the gene pool should remain foremost when considering entering a dog that could possibly take points from a dog that could contribute to the dwindling gene pool.”

“I’m sorry if a nice dog is excluded because it fails a clearance, but this sets a bad example to newbies in our breed and gives the impression we are not really serious about genetic health.”

"I believe that if you knowingly show a dog in AKC conformation that will not pass one of the four basic clearances that you are doing a disservice to the breed as a whole. I know of people finishing dysplastic dogs trying for an outstanding status on the sire or dam."

"I would prefer to know that the dogs shown either have clearances or will obtain them when they reach the correct age. Conformation is supposed to be a showcase for breeding dogs, and that is why they are not neutered."

Because of space limitations, I can't use the dozens of quotes on this question. Suffice it to say that the majority of people did not think that clearances should have a bearing on whether you show and finish or special your dog. A "live and let live" attitude seemed to rule most of the thought process. Again, I was surprised.

For those who said something to the effect of, "We can't police it, so we shouldn't pay any attention to it," I will suggest that making laws about clearances and showing never entered my mind. It was more a matter of community acknowledgement of the importance of clearances for dogs being evaluated as breeding stock. I don't want to be the Gestapo, either.

So this was a stupid question...

Remember, I didn't know what kind of responses I'd get, so just to give you full disclosure, I also blindly asked the following question:

Do you think that the GRCA Code of Ethics as it pertains to breeding should also be applied to competing with dogs in conformation?

If you've read this far, I'll bet you can predict the answers!

"No — even though you're supposed to be showing your best breeding stock, not all dogs shown will be bred. These are two very different situations. Showing a dog does not have an impact on the breed if that dog is not bred, as opposed to a dog's having health clearances before they should be bred."

"No, should not. Some owner-handlers have no plan on breeding, just want to have the experience of finishing their dog. I see nothing wrong with this. I do see something wrong with owners put-

ting their dogs with handlers, and those being finished with serious faults! A bitch finishing with four missing teeth! Yes, I was there when it happened."

"I think clearances are pretty important, but then again you need dogs shown to add for the points."

"No. While I think these issues of clearances and genetic testing are of utmost important to breeding, it is irrelevant to showing."

One more thing

I left a blank space on the survey for people to write whatever they wanted, and I was not disappointed. Some really interesting ideas sprang forth:

"I do not feel you should be able to earn an OS/OD, VC/VCX, or a Hall of Fame designation if the dog does not have the four major clearances. These titles are supposed to designate superior achievement, and if you don't have full clearances I do not consider that dog to be a stellar example of the breed. Similarly, I do not feel the CCA should be used to qualify any dog or get for these titles, as it is given to virtually any dog who shows up and does not demonstrate excellence of any sort and is not competitive. If my SDHF dog has to earn a field title, then field dogs should have to earn a conformation point. The CCA is a pacifier given to placate owners of mediocre dogs and offensive to those who actually attempt to breed for a versatile dog who conforms to the standard and passes health clearances. Dogs that have disqualifying faults are passed because they receive the required overall points — saying this warrants the dog being awarded titles for superior achievement is ridiculous."

"As the administrator of a popular Facebook page, I receive many, many questions about the COE. Most people see it as a mandate — they don't realize it's a guideline, with some caveats such as recording failed clearances in a publicly searchable database. Full disclosure is the key — and most don't realize this fact. Although I personally have never bred a Golden that didn't adhere to the COE, that is my decision. Others can make fully informed decisions based on their experiences and logical reasoning. Every situation is different, and the GRCA is not a policing organization."

"Unfortunately, I feel we have some double standards going in the area of breeding and showing dogs. There are breeders out there today that are the first to criticize someone that breeds or shows without a clearance, yet these are the same people breeding COI's in the 30's and 40's with cancer behind them or breeding multiple generations without elbow clearances. Some of these people feel they are above the law and are entitled to do what they want due to their time in the breed."

"What good does it do to try to regulate showing with clearances when we have so many Golden's in the ring today who are winning yet do not meet the standard and are being passed off as being correct? When breeding you must, or should, take the whole dog into account, not just one part. That's what has gotten this breed into the trouble it's in. First hips were emphasized, so breeders zeroed in on them and we lost fronts and went through the GSD stage. We are finally coming out of that somewhat so if we keep zeroing in on this and that to be allowed to show soon there will be very few Golden's making entries — either that or many people may start falsifying this info like they did back in the 90s when dogs that couldn't pass hips were substituted with dogs that had already in order to give the first dog a number. Thus many of today's dogs are already based upon lies. So to now come back and say you cannot show your dog unless they have passed all clearances and also are free of every potential or known health issue, who would there be left to show? I would much rather see more done on taking back our breed from the pros and the judges — to get this breed back on track."

"It's frustrating to see afflicted dogs take points away from one who has clearances. As a breeder, required clearances would make it easier when selecting a stud dog. It would be interesting to see how this would work."

"I can see both sides of this issue. On one hand, I know people who show dogs because they love the sport and never breed a litter. Just because a dog has finished his CH does not mean he is a good representation of the breed. We have seen that happen over and over again."

Conformation Conversations, *continued*

Too many factors at play when showing a dog, mainly who is on the end of the lead, and their location in this country. Certain handlers have reputations for being able to finish anything on a lead. With that being said, it is also frustrating when the dog with PU or whatever wins over other nice dogs and you know full well it will never be bred. At that point you feel like those points were stolen for no reason. However, showing dogs is a sport, not a criteria for breeding."

The end?

My goal in offering this column up for your consideration is to examine why dog shows should remain an important part of the world of purebred dogs. I don't think I'm on a mountaintop, holier than thou. I don't think there are right and wrong reasons to compete at dog

shows. I do believe, however, that we need to have a conversation about this topic. I do believe that the community that promotes and pays for the event we call "conformation" should at least be on the same page as to why it is important.

And so, in conclusion, I ask only one thing. Write your own paragraph that begins with, "I show dogs because..." The next time you're at a dog show, ask the person next to you to read your paragraph and ask them, "Why do you show dogs?" I'm curious how many people — not only Golden folks — take the AKC's definition seriously. Or how many would scoff at the notion that it exists to help us improve our breed.

Because I'm a helpful person, I'm trying to rewrite the AKC's explanation of dog shows for the 21st Century. How would you rewrite it?

"Conformation" is the official name

for "dog shows." Some of the shows are quite glamorous, but the true purpose of conformation no longer has anything to do with evaluating breeding stock. Although we look back on those days with an indulgent chuckle, showing dogs today is a really fun social event that will allow you to do something with your dog. Don't worry about health or genetics when you enter the ring, and make sure that you have plenty of disposable income if you want to do well! To learn more, contact a local AKC dog club.

Thank you to everyone who responded to this survey. I only wish I could have used all of your quotes. If you would like to participate in future surveys, please send an e-mail to conformationeditor@gmail.com.