

Show Psychology

by Goran Bodegard

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“Why I show dogs! – It is the cheapest way to get onto stage.” This answer was given by a successful breeder who is also a well-known international judge. Although humoristic this reply contains the core of truth that is worth some analysis and assessment.

P psychologically you differentiate between needs and wishes. When a need is not fulfilled the result is traumatic - when a wish is not fulfilled the result is frustration which may initiate the search for new ways to reach satisfaction. It is a need to sleep – it is a wish to sleep in a soft comfortable bed...

Is it a need or a wish to get onto the stage? Is it a need to win Best In Show with a dog?

Dog shows have changed radically. The original purpose was to get the result of your breeding work assessed by an expert with the intention of securing the heritage of the purebred race and support its improvement. – When I first visited dog shows as a boy in Sweden during the fifties there were several shows without any group or Best in Show competitions – It was considered ludicrous to compare individuals of

different breeds and beyond the meaning and purpose of dog shows. – This basic and traditional way of regarding the reason for dog shows still prevails in official and formal discussions and the drastic changes of shows into another competitive sport are not rarely considered to be just ambiguous side effects.

The reason for these changes lies in the answer quoted above - the basic human need for recognition acknowledgement and admiration. There is principally no opposition between combining this private aspect with the more objective reasons for arranging dog shows with the intention of preserving dog breeds. Who has the right to moralize about the wish to present and win with something you have created or achieved and which is symbolically close to and a projection of something important in yourself or has even become partly a substitute for yourself?

Elena Spector - an all round judge from Argentina - judged in Boliva and in the ring came a family – father and mother and six children presenting their beloved dog. The father carried the Pekinese dressed in a christening robe and Elena solved the situation by having the family parading round the ring and then instructed about the more common procedure in presenting dogs for assessment at shows.

We do our best when we show our dogs - and it is only when the competition itself and the manner of presentation become ends in themselves and loses the connection



with the importance of the dog breed that there is a risk included in the new sport of competing with show dogs. – The balance is lost when judges are appointed not on their personal knowledge and merits but due to their economically beneficial usefulness regarding the breeds and number of entries they can take - And when people have at home a complete set up of the various types in the breed to fit various judges' tastes and also prefer anonymous judges from far away to a well known authority. When the commercial influence is outgrowing the quality aspect the show arranging clubs are harmful to the breeds. When the winning at any cost and price has become much more important than the interest for the breed the competitive sport has fostered and developed a dog addiction that is harmful for the mental well being of people.

It is fairly easy to see and understand when the competitive sport has become an obsession and compulsion and builds up a threat for the social and economic existence of the dog show exhibitor. The main sign of the pathological exaggeration is the experience of narcissistic offence from not having won



(however reasonably understandable the defeat is) leading to the impulse of undoing this by immediately showing to win again or undertake inadequate means to deny what has happened. – This person has most probably collected all his eggs in one basket only and become hypersensitive to frustrations of wishes and is not able to redirect himself by getting (or breeding) a better dog to win with or taking realistically in account what has happened to him and his life when the sport has become an addiction. – The dog shows shall not be blamed for personality distortions of this sort but undoubtedly the development of the grandiosity glamour and fame nowadays connected to these competitions do not make life simpler for

the one breeder/exhibitor who really aim to be part of the game not only by breeding but also winning. - The risks for the dog breeding per se is obvious when people start select their stock on what happens in the show ring more than out of their knowledge and care for the breed.

The explosion of the dog show sport has increased the demand for judges and the international interchange of such services – This is principally positive but in reality sometimes most doubtful when the actual experience behind an awarded certificate or winner title is embarrassingly low. In some countries the overall kennel organisation has strict control on this by scrutinising the merits of foreign judges – in other countries a formal licence is enough - The various show systems can in differing degree act destructively and promote cheap champions. Too easily gained awards also encourage the tendency towards dog show addiction. It takes a recognizable amount of psychic strength and integrity for a judge to withhold championship point or certificates to dogs which he has – due to the systems - earlier awarded first prizes in the classes. “There is always a winner in a class at a dog show but that might not necessarily be of champion quality” was a most valuable remark of one of my English tutors. – If the show system makes is easier to eliminate dogs earlier – by applying a quality grading system - the judge is more seldom put in the position of having to withhold at the very end since the eliminated dogs never come into the challenge. The meaningfulness of the champion title is then preserved and exhibitors easier understand that all dogs that could be shown in fact are no champions – May times you mee exhibitors questioning



your decisions because his dog has earlier gained so many points and certificates. So many times you have to understand that the dog show competitor in fact does not care so very much about your opinion if it is not combined with the high enough award. – I have found in my country where all dogs are given an individual written critique that sometimes more than 30% of the exhibitors never pick up the copy of the critique you have dictated.... So much for your expertise in the modern dog show world...

But of course there are most wonderful exceptions – I judged some years ago in a far away country and a young boy come into the ring with a German Shepherd with a shark mouth dropped ears and an afghan like coat. – I took a deep breath and told the boy that these faults were not acceptable - the boy looked respectfully into my eyes and shook my hand “Thank you sir – I have read in a book that a dog with these flaws cannot be awarded a prize at a dog show” – He had showed his dog to get a confirmation about what was right and wrong and was obviously satisfied with the result which supported his understanding of meaningfulness (which is another basic human need – parallel to the need of being admired and chosen the best...).

Very close to the question “Why do you show dogs?” is “Why do you judge dogs?” – and what makes you think that you can judge all breeds?? - Judging dogs must never become equal to condemning dogs--- never equal to just look for the dog with the least faults... Judging dogs must always include a moment of searching for the ultimate in beauty and aesthetics - and it is very justified to ask an all rounder what makes him or her

believe that he knows it all – because nobody can do that. – But at best he or she has an urge (addiction?) to go around the world continuously looking for this special quality of balance and beauty which never is tied down to just one or a few breeds.

I am basically a sight hound person - and I was thus very positively astonished when I one day far up in



northern Norway was faced with a Norwegian Buhund bitch that made me totally paralyzed because she was so beautiful - I had to ask the owner to stay a little longer in the ring after the judging for me to be able to just look at her more. – Maybe it is possible to be an all rounder?

Maybe and at best there are exhibitors and judges enough to have this special need and quality in common? – then there is good hope for continuous high quality dog breeding in spite of the dog show intoxication.

Goran Bodegard

Dr. Bodegard got his first dog, a deerhound, when he was 13. He spent several summers as a teenager in England working with dogs and learning more about them.

He started breeding greyhounds in 1966 and in 1975 co-bred the bitch Ch Piruett, who became the Swedish Dog of the Year. He continued to co-breed greyhounds for nine generations, producing numerous important dogs that influenced the breed in Scandinavia, England and the US.

He has judged shows since 1966 and qualified as an all rounder under the FCI in 1997. He has judged at Crufts, FCI World Shows and at expo's around the world, averaging about 30 to 40 shows a year. He is actively involved in the Swedish Kennel Club and breed clubs, and writes articles for dog publications in Sweden, England and the US. He recently chaired a judges conference in Sweden about the risks of exaggerations and extreme types in show dogs jeopardizing health and soundness.

Dr. Bodegard is also a semi-retired paediatrician, psychoanalyst and child psychologist and is currently involved in research and clinical work with seriously ill and disturbed refugee children.

