



The Truth About Dog Shows and Reality TV

A CLASSIC IS NEVER OUT OF SEASON



BY DOUG JOHNSON

When I originally was challenged to sit down and present to breeders for the AKC Better Breeding series, I wanted to do something different, something provocative, and something relevant. I remember typing away and it became like a Southern Baptist sermon. It was very emotional and lively. I was taking them to church in my office! Trust me!! It was during that writing session that I stumbled upon the act we all do of preserving genetic traits. This led to the movement that we all know as the PRESERVATION BREEDERS MOVEMENT. This cultural phenomenon really has changed the narrative of the sport today. Together with our panel of like-minded breeders, we promoted the idea and it certainly has caught on and is here to stay.

While I'd started to think of breeders as preservationists, popular culture was influencing me. Much of the television programming was filled with competition reality shows and I saw a great correlation to these shows with our sport, and it was my hope that we could shift the breeder demographic lower by drawing comparisons to the shows' popular concepts. I began to model every litter as if it was the next *Project Runway* challenge. I used that television show as the model since it is a reality competition show, and certainly our dog shows feel like they are too! Afterall, they are the place where we present our latest and greatest creations.

Dog showing and dog breeding is an individual sport and we walk that path alone. But we can be prone to veer off course by distractions. Those distractions can be an animal that is a current big winner which causes us to think that we need to emulate that dog's style. As a breeder, you can be swayed by a fad or a modern interpretation of an original design. But what competitive television shows remind us is that originality is rewarded. Over and over again your creativity and your individual take is much more valuable than the copy or imitation that has the essence of something it is not.

As breeders, we're always trying to reinvent ourselves. We set our own bar, and when we work to reach goals, we push our bar up and try to slightly improve upon it, generation after generation. The challenge is to continue to push and push and produce a slightly better, but similar, version while retaining all breed-specific qualities. It's about your brand longevity, where you have a base classic and you add the detailing that defines who you are as a breeder. These are the dogs you become known for. They are the brand you've designed. And I think, just like the fashion designer, you change and adapt with the season or the environment so that you remain current.

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I think Golden Retrievers are an interesting example of this, because the breed is now harkening back to more of a functionality standpoint versus some of the more dressed up versions of the breed. A lot of breeds go through that fancy, stylized version where we add some detailing that is not necessarily in the written Standard but it becomes sort of vogue. It's like having a jacket that has peaked lapels or one that's double breasted. The tuxedo jacket stays the same but we add some flair with a satin trim or a shawl collar—but they're all jackets in the end. This is why we hear the lay person say to the judge, "I don't know how you can tell those Goldens apart. They all look alike to me." And yet judges of the breed will think, "The diversity in this ring is amazing."

There are breeds in each Group where there's a huge range of acceptable type—or styles. And we react differently to those styles individually, thinking, "This Vizsla is a little too far to the left, and that one is a little too far to the right." And we recognize that one dog has gotten stylized with a flat croup and high-set tail, and going to the other extreme the one on the other end is very rounded-down in the croup, with a bit of a houndy ear. In fashion terms, one has a peaked lapel and the other has a shawl collar. They are two different styles, where breeders have taken the genetic traits and manipulated them just a little bit to have a more desirable effect in that kennel. So, you're always going back and forth.

In the show ring, there are times when a dog wins because it brings value to the breed today. As a judge, you understand the need for the more moderate dog, and that dog needs to be seen for multiple reasons. Maybe the breed currently struggles with some soundness issues, like a cathedral front, or they're getting too big in size or mass. You might think, "Let's go back to the classic definition of the tuxedo jacket and then see how much dressing can be added without going overboard." And then, as they say on *Project Runway*, "You need to edit that." Breeders, like designers, can go too far in making a good thing overdone, overproduced, and what I've called in the past, Americanized in its presentation. And when those things get in a kennel you can't get rid of them.

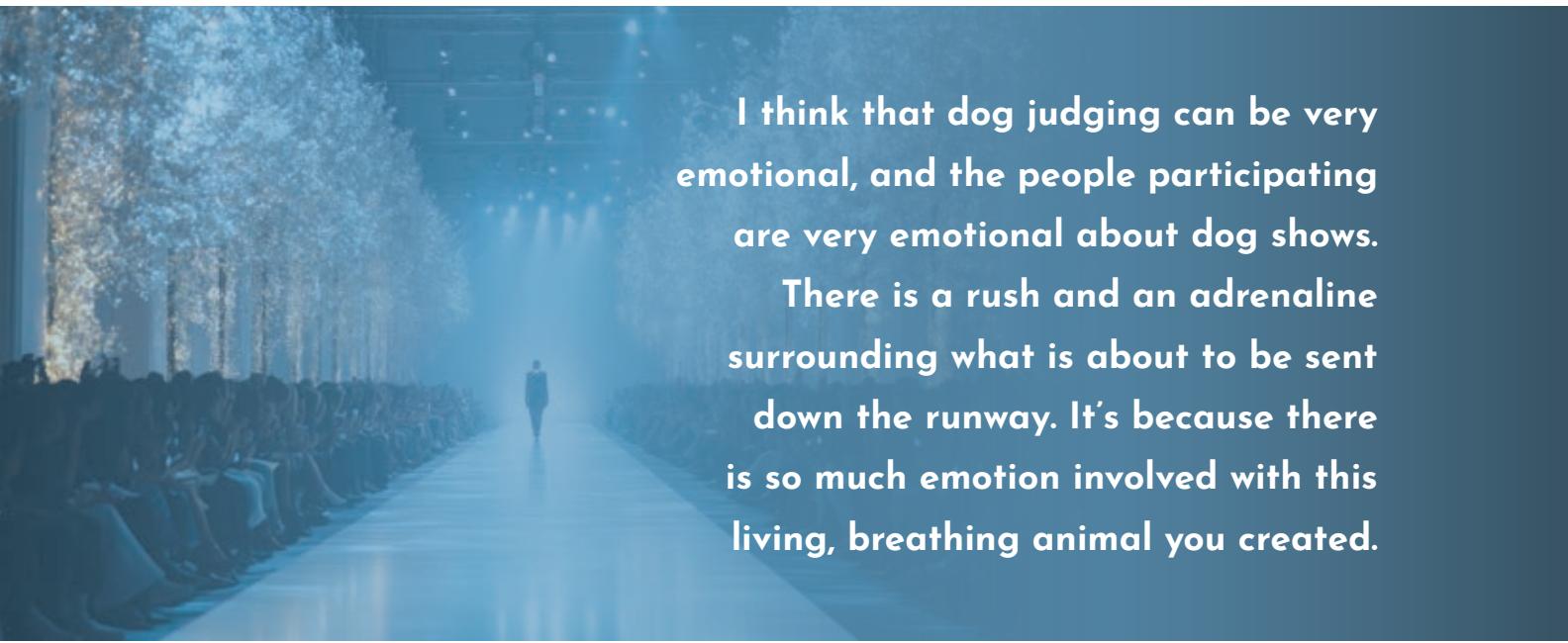
The other end of this discussion is asking when a breeder has become a Betsey Johnson, where everything you do is so over the top, so avant-garde, that your niche market product is very limited in its appeal. You've redefined what it is to have that "style," and some of it doesn't have mass appeal. Not everybody lives that loud. In English Cocker Spaniels, for example, I want something sort of basic, round, with massive bone—not settery. I like them sort of dumpy and not so stylized. That's more appealing to me because that's what I think they should be. I don't think they need to be racy and flatter; they need to be rounder and fuller. And so, if you dress these dogs up and overly refine them from the very basic silhouette of the breed, it's easy to lose my interest.

The product that you produce as a designer or a breeder can be hot for a minute, and people can buy into it until it's corrected by the next phase of what's hot. "One day you're in, the next day you're out." It's a short shelf life for a fad; a fancy, stylized version of a classic. The classic is the template, and that type of animal never goes out of style. Judges must be mindful of these fads and select accordingly.

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I remember judging a regional specialty, and when the first dog was on the table I thought, "Whoa, he's going to be hard to beat." And in fact, he won the breed. As a judge, you start sorting with the very first entrant; from 6-9 forward the comparison of breeding stock is on. All dogs are sorted by comparing them to the one previous to the next. Once we find the ONE we like, that animal becomes the template and the one to beat in order to win in the end. Judges have a memory and we sort in our brain as the day goes on.

Recently, I judged a specialty and had a bitch in my ring that I'd previously dismissed because her down and back wasn't strong enough on the given day. Well, I thought I'd be taking her out of contention, but when I got her among her peers I thought, "She feels better than all of them. She's the only one with the right shape, with the right amount of bone, body, balance, and substance." She also had an appealing way about her, the way her neck arched in a typical way for the breed—and her demeanor was breed specific. All of those things ranked very highly for breed quality. Her down and back was not clever, but it was better than I'd remembered from the previous adjudication. However, her down and back was not as poor as the vast majority of her competition. So, on the breed level, she excelled and ended up winning the specialty. I said



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to the exhibitor that I had really mixed emotions about the winner, because I'd found her previously and loved her but didn't use her because of her down and back. Yet, when she was put with her own kind she was on point for the competition—and far better in type. Her breed type was classic for her breed.

There's an unwritten "three times and you're out" rule in the sport. Every day is a new day, but if an exhibitor keeps bringing chiffon to a judge who is looking for velour... it's not going to happen. The exhibitor's job is to learn what a judge is looking for in their breed. For instance, some Sporting dog judges are very utilitarian in their search. They don't want a dog that's fancy or pretty. They don't recognize pretty, they recognize purpose. Those judges are interested in dogs that are purposeful, sound, and basic. They're not interested in any sloppy, gloppy, typey dog. That doesn't impress them. They want breeders to dial it back to the basics. Bring them a hard back, good front, a good rear, and balance. On the other hand, I tend to really look for that extreme. I want breeders to push the envelope on type. I want to see the nose on a Japanese Chin tucked in and tilted back, and I want it way up by the eyes. Now, this doesn't mean that I want breeders to get carried away to the detriment of the dog's health, but I do celebrate the extreme type qualities of a breed. What's the point of having a Neapolitan Mastiff with no skin? You might as well have a Cane Corso.

In my seminar process, I tell judges who are just starting to learn to listen to their body, because when you "feel it" you know it's right. It's just like putting on that nice pair of shoes and thinking, "Oh, this is a good fit." When you go over a dog, your body will say, "This is the winner." And when that happens, listen, because it's telling you everything is in balance. It's a guttural change you can feel. It gives you goosebumps. When you are passionate and interested and educated in something, you will have an emotional response to the animals in front of you. I remember judging an entry of Spinoni Italiani where I went over to a bitch

immediately and went over her. It was highly inappropriate, but I had to touch her, and I knew when I went over her that she would win. She typified the breed. She was dripping in breed quality. I couldn't stop myself. She was exquisite. You will be lucky to have these experiences, when something walks in your ring and embodies everything that you know the breed to be. They are a living, breathing work of art that was created with intent, and by some random act of all the genetic material, everything fell into the correct place. This is the chemistry of success.

I also remember Frank Sabella telling the story of a Standard Poodle coming into his ring at PCA, an Open Dog, and he went over to the lady and said, "I'm going to need you to stand right here." He had fallen for this dog, loved the dog, and compared every other dog to him the whole time. And the dog ended up going Winners Dog. He never wanted him out of his sight. So, know that a judge will react to what he wants when he finds it. It's sort of like the diamond you've been looking for all day, and when you find it your body says, "It's right there." And you get to touch it and you say to yourself, "This is it, I can feel it. This is the one." I think people have this same reaction to joyous moments in their lives. People cry standing in front of the statue of David, for example. They literally tear up because they're so moved by the beauty that's in front of them.

I think that dog judging can be very emotional, and the people participating are very emotional about dog shows. There is a rush and an adrenaline surrounding what is about to be sent down the runway. It's because there is so much emotion involved with this living, breathing animal you created. I enjoy being taken on the emotional journey, and as a judge, I do well up at times thinking, "That is gorgeous." Dogs that make you melt. Dogs that challenge you to *not* appreciate them. They defy you, and to be clear, this is true of any art form. Whether it's a designer's new spring collection or the masterpiece of a Renaissance sculpture, the artistry should take you on an emotional journey. ■