

TOP 20 COMPETITION JUDGING PROCEDURE

By Beverly Vics

This, the second in my series of “Doin’ it My Way,” deals with the planning and execution of an outstanding Top 20 production. Yes, “PRODUCTION.” Planning and executing the event is not much different than producing a play or any other top notch entertainment production. And yes, it should be “ENTERTAINMENT” as much as competition. I believe that if I produce the event as Entertainment, the competition becomes that much more significant.

To begin with, planning is essential. Early on you have to choose and invite the judges. For the Akita Club of America (ACA), we use three judges, a Working Group/Best in Show approved judge, a Breeder Judge, usually but not always AKC approved, and a Handler Judge. I have always taken the judging panel seriously. One year we had an all foreign panel; a judge from Italy, one from England and one from Canada. The year ACA had their National Specialty in Gettysburg, we followed the historic theme and had our Breeder Judge be one of the most influential Akita Breeders in the history of the breed, the one and only Barbara “BJ” Andrews. Our Handler Judge Kathy Mines, was an Akita handler who early on, won Bests in Show and National Specialty top honors. Our Working Group/BIS judge was the judge who had, historically, judged the very first ACA National Specialty, Lt. Col. Wallace H. Pede. The judges remain totally secret prior to the event. Only my husband, John, and I know their names until they are announced just before judging begins. Although it is an honor to be invited to judge such an event, it is not easy to find the caliber of judge you want for the event who will agree to come for free. At least with the ACA, the Top 20 judges are not paid for their services.

Top 20 Pre-Show Preparation

You must have a venue with a ring large enough to accommodate the dogs properly, which depends on whether you are hosting Akitas or Havanese. You need to have experts to handle the lights and sound system. A cocktail party with appropriate hors d’ourves and refreshments precedes the actual judging. I have been very fortunate working within the ACA as the site coordinator has always helped with the on site preparations. Finally and most important, a committee of people who are willing to work hard behind the scenes.

The Top 20 Committee has the task of getting the names of the Top dogs from the AKC website. The challenge is trying to find the current owners names and up to date addresses. Our biggest issue here has been with owners not receiving their invitations because we have incorrect or obsolete information on the dog. The invitations need to be printed and mailed four months prior to the event along with a congratulations letter outlining the event, rules and regulations for eligibility, and a copy of the current score sheet. The superintendent receives the entries and entry monies and then provides the engraved rosettes. Each exhibitor also receives a certificate of accomplishment from the hosting club. The committee purchases the trophy and, because I am computer literate, I purchase blank certificates and covers and print the certificates myself.

At a time closer to the event, I meet with stewards and other committee helpers; a chief steward, someone to see that the rosettes, medallions, and certificates are ready to be awarded after the judging. People to be at the switches for the room lights to lower and raise the lights at the appropriate times and The Master of Ceremonies, my husband John, needs to write his introduction comments.

Judging Procedure For Top 20 Competition

I have judged several Top 20 Events over the years. They have all been pretty much the same. Three



judges, spectacular dogs, black tie, and of course lots of food and drink for all. Most of the judging procedure consisted of one large ring. All the entrants come in for that first look, then each comes in individually. The dog is set-up for examination and each of the three judges examines him. He is gaited by his handler in the pattern previously agreed upon by the three judges.

As the dog moves away, three heads are trying to squeeze together to each have a reasonable vantage point of seeing the dog moving away... and then coming back. As the dog moves around the ring, the judges separate, watch the lateral movement and when the dog stops before them, take their clip boards back from their steward and score the dog as they see fit.

When I have judged this way, I usually have a reasonable vantage point, as

I am a woman and not too tall. The bigger gentlemen and taller ladies let me kind of... go to the front of the pack. (Lucky me!) But herein lays a couple of problems. The obvious one being that not all of the judges get the same view of the dog going away and coming back. Therefore, they may not see the same things. The not so obvious problem is when one of the judges likes something and sighs under his breath, says "wow"... or simply smiles (loudly) or if he doesn't like something, makes a comment like "how did that ever finish." If you think it doesn't happen.... think again.

As regards judges conversing or commenting: At one Top 20 Event where I was a spectator, I noticed one judge make a comment to another judge. Several other people noticed several comments between the judges. Now to give the judges the benefit of the doubt, perhaps one was commenting to the other "How smashing you look tonight dahl-ing"..... but that's not the impression that was given to the spectators. To resolve this problem, some clubs set up "stations" within one large ring. Although this is better, it poses its own set of challenges.

So when my husband, John, agreed to be the Chairman of the Top 20 Committee for our National Breed Club five or six years ago..... well you know what that means.... Anyway, after hearing many complaints from many exhibitors about judges' collusion, I came up with an idea. Now generally John hates when I have an idea because it usually winds up costing him lots of money but this time, he listened to my idea and agreed that it was a good idea..... and wasn't going to cost him any money (that always makes it a good idea).



Plan For Multiple Judging Rings

Here's what we did. We took that 75' by 40' ring and made three 25' x 40' rings out of it, thereby separating all of our judges. Now each judge has his own ring. He doesn't have to agree to use a gaiting pattern he's not used to using. He can use whatever gaiting pattern he likes. There is no possible way there can be any unintended (or otherwise) inflections or comments between judges, as the judges are not near enough to each other to hear if one should make an utterance.... and anyway, they're not judging the same dog at the same time. Each judge has his own steward to hold and pass his clip board.

The benefit for the dogs? Each dog, in order to get TO the Top 20 has been judged, more than likely, three times in a day; Breed judging, Group judging, Best in Show judging. By three different judges but not all three at the same time. From the dog's perspective.... walk into the ring (where's my liver?)... Handler stacking (where's my liver?) Judge examining (WML?) then my friend the handler and I get to stretch our legs and trot around the ring for a bit (mmmm getting a little piece of liver finally) Then later doing the same for another judge, then later yet, a third judge. Having three rings allows the dog to feel more like a regular dog show, stand, get examined, gait around a little, then go to another judge, do the same.... and then a third. And it doesn't stress the dog because it is quickly accomplished.

The first time we presented the three ring idea to the entrants, they didn't think they'd like it. Change is hard. They'd been doing it the other way for 10 years or so, but they all agreed to try it for if nothing else it kept the judges from comparing notes (which they all hated from previous years). One handler really objected, however. A close friend of mine, she approached us privately and said that she didn't think it was fair to these large dogs (Akitas) to expect them to be able to properly show lateral movement in such a small ring. I agreed and John came up with a terrific compromise. We'll take down the ring separators and only separate the inner portion of the large ring, thereby allowing the three dogs that were being judged at the time to use the entire 75 x 40 ring to show lateral movement. She agreed that was a good compromise.

The Top Twenty Event Is A Formal Party

So here's how it goes. We have about an hour of hors d'ourves and cocktails and small talk. At starting time, the spectators are invited to take their seats ringside. Then the lights go down. At this point, the ring is totally open. The ring separators are not yet up. A spotlight finds the master of

ceremonies, my husband John, as he begins the evening's entertainment. He says a few pertinent words, then one by one introduces the Chief Ring Steward and then the other three Ring Stewards. Meanwhile another committee member is passing out the evening's flyer which lists the Committee members, Stewards, and judges resumes. John then, one by one, introduces the judges for the evening. Each one enters the ring and takes a seat near where John is speaking.



The music begins to play. It's powerful music for powerful dogs (I have Snoopy piano music planned for Havanese). The lights are down and the spotlight finds the first dog as he comes into the ring... gaits around the full ring.... poses for just a few seconds in the middle of the ring, then moves off to the side. The spotlight moves to the ring entrance and finds the second dog, follows him around the ring... stops to pose for a few seconds in the center and so on until all of the dogs have come into the ring.

As this is happening, all the dogs have lined up along one side of the ring. Then, the lights come up, the music becomes subdued but continues playing and judging begins.

The judges have previously been given instructions that if they have any compliments for each other or any other small talk to make with each other it is to be done before they enter the ring. They have been instructed that during the "group" judging times, when all the dogs are in the ring together and all the judges are judging in the same ring at the same time, no communication is to be initiated and they are to maintain physical distance between them.

So now we have all of the beautiful Top 20 – The Top Winning dogs in the ring before us. The three judges have their first real look at the group. As with "regular" judging routines, the first thing the judge does is take a look over the group as a whole.... With my Top 20 procedures, I try to keep the regimen as close to normal, in ring, routines as I can. The judges look at the dogs in any way they like.... walk down the row from the front.... from the side... whatever is most comfortable for them. When they all return to the center of the ring, the Chief Steward tells the handlers to gait the dogs around the ring two times, then exit to the pre-arranged ring exit.

Choreographing Show Ring Procedures

Everyone knows exactly what to expect because a few hours before the event, we have a meeting for the exhibitors. One representative for each dog MUST attend this meeting. I encourage the person that is going to handle the dog in the ring to be the representative for their dog, as this meeting is where the choreography of the in-ring procedures is explained. The meeting is usually held at the ring where the Event will be taking place later that evening. The handlers decide if they will be judged in numerical order or draw numbers for placement of judging order. They are given specific instructions as to the choreography of themselves and their dogs for the event. They are instructed about their first appearance. That they will gait one full revolution, go to the center and "present" their dog.... no stacking.... only "presenting," stay for 5 seconds and move to a designated side of the ring. They know they will then be asked to gait as a group, two times around.... leaving plenty of space between the dogs, and out the designated exit. They then wait for their "turn" in the judging rings. They are instructed that they will go to each of the judges/rings in turn. The first dog will be in Ring 1 first, then when Dog #1 gets to Ring 2 and Dog 2 is to Ring 3, all the dogs will have been judged and all three dogs will exit the ring together. They are told that after the ring separators are removed, they will return for the "Group" judging and lastly, personal introductions. All biographies for these personal introductions of the dogs must be turned in to the Top 20 Chairman at that meeting.

After the group of dogs has left the ring, the ring separators are placed at pre-marked positions to separate the ring into three. Each judge and steward move to their predetermined ring, a chair is placed in each ring and the first three dogs are brought in. First dog going to Ring 1, Second to Ring 2, and Third dog to Ring 3. Each judge has decided and communicated to his steward where each dog will stand for the initial examination. (Except for whichever judge is in the ring where the videographer will be taping. The videographer has a designated place where each dog will be set-up and examined for best results on the video.) Each judge then examines the dog before him, moves the dog in whatever pattern works best for him (no banging heads to see that rear), marks his score sheet, sends the dog to the far side of the ring and sits down on his chair to wait until all judges have completed their procedure. When all three judges have sent their dog to the far side of the ring, the

Chief Steward motions to the judges to rise and move to the center of the ring. All three dogs are then gaited around the entire ring for each judge to evaluate the lateral movement on the dog he just finished examining, he will then finish marking the scoresheet for that dog.

Dog One exits the ring. Dog Two moves to Ring 1, Dog Three to Ring 2, and Dog Four comes into Ring 3. (Attachment 2). Each judge then judges the dog before him and again, Dog Two exits, Dog Three moves to Ring 1, Dog Four to Ring 2, Dog Five to Ring 3.

When all dogs have been judged by each of the three judges, the last three dogs exit the ring together and the ring separators are again removed. All the dogs are brought back into the ring together as a Group. The judges clip board now has a "Group" sheet. This "Group" sheet has all of the dogs' numbers down the left side and an empty column on the right side for the "Group placement" to be written. The judges have been instructed to note on their sheets place. I'll explain what these place-score later when I explain the scoring procedure.

Just as in many all breed dogs are brought around end of the line. If a judge away and back, he can to have the dog move is allowed to move, a specified number of dogs. Each of the judges has placements on his score sheet. The Chief Steward collects the clip boards and when they first were introduced, the lighting is lowered and the first dog is announced, his name and of his accomplishments. One of the judges handler with a Rosette



Group judging routines, the ring one at a time to the wants to see a dog move ask the Chief Steward for him. Each judge again, only a specified dog. Each judge is not allowed to move each dog again. When made his placement sheet, the Chief clip boards and to where they sat introduced. The and the spotlight number is announced. The brief biography is presented his imprint with the

dog's name, a certificate for each of the owners, and a medallion on a ribbon is placed around the dog's neck (if medallions have been offered by the club).

It's a spectacular event. The music, the formality, the dogs, the people..... it is a very special event. The spectators, as they sit ringside, get to see every dog because no matter at which ring you are sitting, there are no "bad" seats as each dog is presented in each ring.

Scoring The Top Winning Dogs

After the event, the Committee Chairman takes all the scoresheets back to his room. I have my laptop computer with me with a numeric spreadsheet pre-set-up with all the dogs' numbers and three sections, one for each judge, with the exact sections as the score sheets on which the judges wrote their scores. It's just a matter of keying each number from the scoresheet into the spreadsheet. The software automatically adds up each judges' scores to a highest possible score of 100. Then the Group points are added. For each Group 1 a dog receives 5 bonus points. For each Group II 4 bonus points. 3 points for a Group III, 2 for Group IV, and 1 for each Group V placement.

"Why the bonus points?" you may ask. When I judged one of the Top 20 events, there was collusion between two of the judges. One judge had recently purchased a puppy from one of the entrants, the other judge was a very close friend of that same entrant. As with most national competitions, there were two top contenders... one was the friend's dog, the other... well let's just say he had no friends on the panel. Both of those judges low scored the competition and high scored their friend. Obviously, the friend won the competition. I was very upset by this. When John took over the Committee, we decided to add the bonus points to try to give a dog that had been low-balled by one or more judges a chance to add to his score in Group Competition. Since the judges don't add their scores, they don't really know how many points each dog has actually scored. By adding the Group points, each dog has a second opportunity to gain points where he might have lost on the individual. I have found it extremely interesting to compare each judge's individual scoring evaluation to the placement he gave the dog in actual Group competition. Several of the judges have scored a particular dog low

individually, yet placed that same dog Group I or II. And visa-versa.... judges have scored dogs really high on the individual score sheet.... yet placed him 4th, 5th... or not placed at all.

Honoring Owners, Handlers, And Great Champions

It is painstaking, tireless work to campaign a dog and finish the year as one of the top winning dogs in America. It takes dedication, knowledge of the system, personal emotion, time and finances. I believe the people who go to these lengths should be acknowledged and honored by their National Breed Clubs for going above and beyond. National Club's by-laws many times state one of their goals and purpose is to promote the breeding and showing of the breed and to do their best to bring the breed's qualities to perfection. What better way to fulfill this purpose?

The Top 20 Event/Competition is one way we, who love our breed, can recognize and appreciate these dedicated people and their wonderful dogs.