

NZDJA NZ Dog Judges Association Inc

The value of a mentor

by Lavina Diamanti

Mentorship is becoming more and more popular in both business and life skills. Business mentors help keep new ventures on track and profitable, and life coaches help get us out of ruts when we hit challenging times, either personally or professionally. Sports mentors are now a very important part of a multi-million-dollar industry and every professional sports person will give thanks to their mentors when achieving the pinnacle of their sport.

So why, if mentoring has become so popular outside the dog world, is it fast dying within?

According to the Wikipedia definition mentorship is "a relationship in which a more experienced or more knowledgeable person helps to guide a less experienced or less knowledgeable person. The mentor may be older or younger than the person being mentored, but he or she must have a certain area of expertise". I think this is an excellent description but to apply to our sport I would expand it further. I think a mentor for our less experienced judges should be able to push them to be the very best judge they can be, and question and challenge their decisions and judging process. It should include guidance on ring craft, presentation, advice for when travelling to appointments. A good mentor will be there to guide and encourage but will also be honest and offer constructive criticism if warranted.

So how valuable is a mentor? I am sure if you asked any experienced judge they will tell you about the person(s) who mentored them, especially in the first few years of judging. They will recall with clarity, and often humour, the lessons they learned and the sometimes not-so-subtle delivery of the message from their mentor!

I have been very lucky to have mentors who have given me some great advice and continue to do so. Only one of them is a judge, but two things stand out for me with them both: honesty and wisdom. They have both been in the dog world for a long time and from them I have received some of the most honest and unforgettable advice. Both of them have set me back on my heels when I needed to learn that I was still a beginner: the more I learned the more I realised how little I knew.

Now more than ever there seems to be a race to get to the status of All Breeds. And to a certain extent I can understand that, especially if you started judging later in life.

But in that hurried desire to reach the finishing line, are we missing some valuable learning along the way? We are all so busy, all of us, just with life. Are we spending enough time with a senior judge or our mentor discussing breeds and decisions and really getting into some gritty discussions? Are we sitting ringside at shows engaging

in positive, constructive dialogue discussing dogs and judging? Or do we think that because we have passed our exams that our knowledge is good enough and that activity is only for aspiring judges? A senior All Breeds judge once told me that the real learning didn't start until after he had achieved All Breeds status. Only then could he get the experience to really understand all the individual factors of each breed that determined correct breed type.

If you are a judge starting out or with just a few years' experience at Championship level, do you have a person who you consider to be your mentor? If you don't, then is there someone who you could ask to assist you? Will you be open to being mentored with the goal to continue to further your knowledge and to iron out any bad habits you may have picked up along the way?

Honest feedback can be a bitter pill to swallow, and can be equally tough to deliver, but without it, along with encouragement and guidance, how can we possibly continue to improve and grow to be the very best judge we can be?

That, after all, should be the goal of every judge, wouldn't you agree? 🐾

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