

NZDJA

Making Sense of Judging Decisions

by Lavina Diamanti

Judging purebred dogs is a subjective task — it represents a person's opinion as opposed to a measurable observation such as timing the fastest agility dog over a course.

Because judging is subjective, the reasons for a judge's decisions aren't always obvious to an observer. Judges don't critique unless judging at a speciality show so owners and observers aren't given the opportunity to understand the reasoning behind those decisions.

I'm going to try and help make some sense of why judges come up with different decisions and also give you a bit more insight into the decision-making process with a little exercise you can do for fun.

Experience as a breeder and exhibitor are the first things that shape a judge. This is different for each individual. Some judges are "born" into the dog world, others pick up the sport later in life. Some are exhibitors who love dogs and dog showing and have dabbled in breeding and then there are those who have had years of experience with successful breeding programmes.

Next is training. Some are lucky to live in a location with an active judges branch and mentors who give them a lot of time and guidance. Others live remotely and initiate much of their training themselves. Our judges go through a tough theory and practical examination process which takes at least 20 years, but this isn't the case for many visiting judges. In some countries, judges can become licenced to judge All Breeds in as little as five or six years.

Lastly, the time spent in the judging ring. As they become more experienced and their knowledge expands, a judge's confidence grows and they become more decisive in what they will reward and what they will forgive. After all, there is no perfect dog.

Let's imagine you are the judge of a class of four male dogs in the open class. The exact breed is not relevant, but it is a medium-sized functional working dog with a distinctive head. You are required to place them 1st to 4th.

Dog A is six years old, in good condition, typical in outline and head but has a missing premolar and is about 3cm above the maximum height range. The standard is silent on penalising either of these faults. Otherwise he is a very nice dog which moved with reach and drive as required in the standard.

Dog B is four, a little overweight but otherwise in good condition. Although balanced he is steep in the shoulder and lacks angulation in the rear. He is ideal size and has an excellent head. He moved soundly but lacked reach and drive.

Dog C is a 16 month old, in very good condition, very good outline and head but quite unsettled in the ring. He lacks maturity and you have difficulty assessing him due to his behaviour.

Dog D is five, in excellent hard-working condition, has very good angulation, is the best mover in the class, of ideal size but with incorrect ear shape and size, incorrect eye colour and overall a poor quality head.

What is your order? Do you forgive dog D's poor head in favour of his correct body and working ability and place him first or do you forgive dog A's missing tooth and height and place him first? What about dog B's very good head and size but not as good angulation and movement? How hard will you penalise his construction? Would you forgive this in favour of his quality head? And then there is Dog C who is very typical and looks as though he will mature into a very nice dog but today he didn't quite have it together. Would you place him last or would you give him a higher placing?

Your decision will depend on your experience, your knowledge and your understanding of the breed requirements. Did you take into account that it was a working dog and consider form and function? Did you place value on the head? Did your opinions of your own breed affect your decision?

Every judge has had a different journey, has walked in their own shoes, which is why two different judges can assess exactly the same dogs and come up with difference decisions.

Which, in itself, is fantastic. Wouldn't it be boring if the results were always the same? 🐾

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Important Dates

31 January, 2020	Closing date for exam applications
17 March	Theory exams
27/28 June	Auckland practical exams
4/5 July	Christchurch practical exams
11/12 July	Wellington practical exams (if required)