



When it comes to critiques, usually reserved for specialties, what do we expect of the judge? As exhibitors, do we look to the judge only for accolades? It goes without saying that none of us anticipates, nor do we want, censure or disapproval. We easily give lip service to wanting the "best dog to win." But ay, as the idiom goes, there's the rub. Many of us wear blinders and often can't (or don't) see the best dog unless, of course, it is our own.

A strong case might be made as to whether we really want to hear the truth. Perhaps Jack Nicholson's famous line from *A Few Good Men* might be invoked here. The one where, in response to Kaffee's, "I want the truth," Nicholson, as Colonel Jessop, shouts, "You can't handle

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the truth!"

A well-thought out critique should provide the reader with an honest assessment of the entry. That is, if the judge's word is anything to go by. Nothing is more disap-

pointing than a judge's vapid, "I was honored to judge your specialty", "thank you so much for the lovely entry," or, "I was delighted to see the breed in such great shape." The latter becomes particularly disingenuous when such is not considered to be the case by those in the know. It casts a pall over the entire critique and, as a consequence, diminishes its worth.

What is required in order for a critique to carry weight? First of all, the judge must use meaningful terminology... "nice headpiece" doesn't tell us anything other than that the judge liked it, perhaps more than the other headpieces. But it leaves a question mark in one's mind. Why was it nice? What was it that made it a nice headpiece? If we want the critique to educate us, and what other purpose does it offer, this is the sort of question we



# The Critique



should want answered. The judge must be accurate in his assessment of each dog discussed. To do this from memory following a large entry at a specialty is pure folly. It is preposterous to think that a judge can have recall about the finer nuances of an entry, even a few hours later, let alone a week or so down the road. Therefore, it is incumbent upon the judge to either take excellent notes or enlist the use of a tape recorder.

Obviously, since judging is subjective and often involves comparing one dog to another, the reasons for his choices must not only be accurate but also structured so as to convey not so much what was wrong with one but what was "more" right with another. There is much to be learned from a judge who knows the breed and is willing to put his foot to the fire rather than "pussy-foot" around offering little more than platitudes.

How many ways and how often can one say "nicely balanced" or "very nice" and what exactly do these terms conjure up anyway? Are they in any way educational? Hardly. How about a few details to go with this: e.g., the winner of the open bitch class was square in outline and moved smartly with the reach and drive one expects, taking into account her correct front and rear angles. The words, "nicely presented and trimmed" don't offer us much of anything to chew on either. We would hope that all the dogs at a specialty would be nicely presented. We would also expect them to be nicely trimmed, if trimming is required. It would be the exception to this that a judge might choose to cite. Conversely, in a breed where trimming is considered so grievous a fault as to eliminate a specimen from competition, when a judge negatively critiques trimmed dogs after rewarding some of them, the entire critique loses credibility, does it not?

A good critique should provide us with an educational experience, not just about our own dogs and how the judge perceived

them, but also about the breed in general. That is, assuming the judge is truly knowledgeable and has been a student of the breed prior to judging it. Let's face it. The truth may hurt.... which is why many "can't handle it."

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own beings, a negative comment, however carefully worded, is often taken as a personal assault. Broad shoulders are required for every aspect of the sport. At the same time, the judge blessed with a wellspring of canine terminology will find many ways to get his point across in a positive manner. Additionally, when the judge is accurate in his assessment, kennel-blindness aside, we find we can take it.

Considering the critique from another perspective, it does not simply tell the story of the dogs being exhibited. It also reveals the depth of knowledge a given judge has for the breed at hand. Recently a writer for another publication discussed this very topic as he segued into it through castigating the AKC for not allocating some of its millions for the creation and maintenance of a quality judges education program. A case was made against a judge whom he felt did not know what he should have known about the breed being judged. To be sure, when a judge refers to an undershot bite on a terrier as "aesthetic," one must ask if this judge understands dogdom's cardinal rule of form following function. In terrier breeds the bite

must be strong in order that it function properly for its primary job, that of killing vermin. An undershot bite is not a strong bite. When a judge comments that a dog was not properly trimmed, he had better know what the proper trim is for that particular breed.

Many of our high profile and "all-rounder" judges are disinclined to take the time required to write a critique. This is unfortunate as many of them have abundant knowledge to impart and the viewpoints they might share with breeder/exhibitors may be better understood and appreciated since these judges, in general, are more likely to be endowed with accurate terminology. Breeder-judges are usually eager to comply and often are asked to speak to the specialty-giving club at a dinner following the show, thus providing both an oral and a written critique. Some are gifted speakers and some are not. Some are gifted at putting pen to paper and some are not. But the same rules hold true for them...the evaluations must be accurate in order to be enlightening.

We all enter a show with expectations. Some expect to win. But one thing for sure is that we enter hoping for, indeed expecting, a fair and unbiased evaluation of the entry. Often our expectations are dashed. But when this does occur it becomes a learning experience. The accurate and thoughtfully worded critique, replete with meaningful terminology becomes part and parcel of this learning experience. The bottom line here, still, is that a judge must know what he is talking about and must, above all, be right-on with his assessments. In David P. Dickson's seminar, *Techniques for Judging and Presenting Reasons* (University of Wisconsin, April 10-11, 1999), he says that judging is about teaching and communicating, it is about knowledge and experience, it is about the power of observation, making decisions and, finally, about the search for perfection. The judge's critique should reflect all of what judging is about.

