

Judging at the Sydney Royal Dog Show

by Lavina Diamanti

Sometimes in life an opportunity presents itself which is beyond your wildest expectations. Such was the case in March when I received a phone call from John Bryson in Australia, asking if I would be the replacement judge for the Sydney Royal Dog Show. Unfortunately, the contracted judge was no longer able to fulfil her contract due to work reasons. Heck yes!

Unlike my fellow judges, Geraldine Gulbransen, Stephen Meredith and Keith Brown, who had been contracted a year earlier, I didn't have long to prepare myself mentally. It is a long time since a full panel of New Zealand judges officiated at the Sydney Royal which made the invitation even more special. Another thing us judges can thank the pandemic for!

Departure day came around quickly. Our borders might have been opened to travel, but getting in and out of the country wasn't easy, with the list of requirements to meet because of COVID-19. Thankfully we all managed to keep clear of the virus prior to our departure. The next dilemma was what to pack! A message to Gerry confirmed she was having the same issue. Eight days of judging equals eight different outfits including something really nice for general specials day. Then there were the other clothes needed...

I wasn't surprised when my bag weighed over on the scales at the airport and they stuck a 'heavy' label on it. No shopping for me!

On arrival at our accommodation, we were each given a bag of goodies, including a folder with all the Australian Breed Standards in the order each of us were judging them. Plus passes to get in, our judge's badge and some welcome treats. From the time we arrived we were made to feel very special and were looked after exceptionally well. From the team of four in each ring to act as steward, call steward, writer and announcer to the staff in the office, the photographers and the Advance representative, everyone treated us very well.

The Royal is held at Olympic Park, the site of the 2000 Sydney Olympic Game, and runs over 12 days — 8-19 April. The facilities are amazing and this year over 900,000 people attended! The huge stadium had events happening all the time and right up until 9:00pm each night. Every night finished with a fireworks display and the final night included a drone light show. We timed it well and were at the stadium the night that Princess Anne officially opened the show and Keith was lucky enough to have a 'close encounter' with the princess, something which I am sure he will never forget. A Royal Show of this magnitude has a carnival atmosphere. As well as all the livestock and other competitions, the stalls were unbelievable so of course we all had a few purchases to bring home.

Back to the dog showing. It is a benched show so all exhibitors are required to be there all day with their dogs in the benching area so the public can come and talk to them about their breeds. During the judging of the breeds public are in the stands all the time which is why all the placings are announced on the PA.

In addition to the breed judging, we also had some specialty breed shows to judge as well and Keith judged the Junior Handlers. Because the RAS was celebrating its 200th anniversary, they also had a Periodic Class, similar to the breeders group but the exhibitors dressed in period costume. Unfortunately for me I was judging in another ring and was unable to watch this but I understand it was great to watch; the Deerhound group won this class.

Not only was it a show on a grand scale, but some things really stood out for me, such as the graciousness of the exhibitors in accepting my decisions. Even when they were unplaced, they were very courteous. Plus, the enthusiasm with which exhibitors cheered each other on. It was refreshing to witness. Best of Breed at the Sydney Royal holds a lot of kudos let alone a Group or In Show award. For me, it was important that every exhibitor felt they had received their money's worth, and I hope they enjoyed my judging.



Unfortunately, Stephen fell ill part way through the event which is why the finals day photos do not include him. Gerry and Keith picked up his breeds and also judged his group specials. He was bitterly disappointed but looking after one's health must take priority.

General Specials Day arrives. We were given our briefing as to how the day was to pan out. Everything is so well planned and this day is timed to the minute. Best in Show was at 3:15pm, no later, no earlier! Time comes for me to judge my first group, Hounds. During the course of the breed judging, I had some beautiful examples of some of the breeds and I knew this was going to be a tough decision. After having another look at the breeds in the big ring I had to shortlist eight dogs. I joked earlier that pulling just eight wasn't going to be easy, but eight it had to be.

After a further opportunity to run each one again I had made my decision. My steward diligently wrote down my four placings and then out come the boards for the winners to stand beside. Nerve-racking for the final eight exhibitors and equally nerve-racking for me knowing that not only were the grandstands full but the show was being professionally filmed and live-streamed to 20,000 people around the world. Hmmm... wish they had told me that after I had finished. No pressure!

Then comes the announcements: 4th place though to 1st, which I awarded to the beautiful Deerhound. Then on to puppy of group which was followed by the neuter in group. I was then whisked off to the photo booth to have the official photos taken for all the group winners. Then 45 minutes later and I was ready to do it all again for the working group.

At 3:15, it's Best in Show time. Lynn Butler from NSW had this honour and he judged all the In Show classes. Judging at the Sydney Royal is done a bit differently to other shows. Best in Show is judged last.

First up was the Breeders Group in Show. This is a group of four dogs of the same breed with the same prefix. During the preceding days of judging one group was selected each day and sent through to the final. The winner of the Breeders Group in Show was the Saluki.

Similarly each day all the baby puppies exhibited on that day assembled at the end of the judging and one baby was selected to return on General Specials day to compete for Baby Puppy in Show. This task was allocated to whichever judge was left at the end of the day, so we all got several opportunities to select Baby of the Day. Lynn Butler chose the Japanese Spitz as his Baby Puppy in Show.

Next came the Puppies. Again, this is judged a bit different to what we are used to. Each day we would select our best Puppy for each group from the breeds exhibited that day. These winners returned to compete for Puppy of Group and ultimately Puppy in Show. I was thrilled that my Puppy of Group winner, the Dachshund (Miniature Long Haired), was awarded Puppy in Show.



Next came the neuter class. Best Neuter in Show was awarded to the Samoyed and Runner-up to the Pharaoh Hound.

Finally it was Best in Show time, what everyone had been waiting for and Mr Butler selected the beautiful Gordon Setter that Geraldine had sent through to him as his Best in Show and Keith Brown's selection of the lovely Fox Terrier (Wire) as his reserve. And now it was all over. The most amazing experience I could ever have hoped for. The quality dogs, the new friends made, the fun with my fellow judges and the amazing organisers.

It was an honour. Thank you one and all. 🐾

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