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**JUDGING SWEEPSTAKES**

Sweepstakes classes generally attract as much as 45 percent of the total entry at most Bulldog specialty shows. The sweepstakes entry of 204 youngsters aged 6 to 18 months at the Bulldog Club of America's national specialty in Pigeon Forge, Tenn., was no exception. Exhibitors from throughout the nation entered a record 96 dogs and 108 bitches in the event. There were 44 puppy bitches entered in the 6 to 9 month class, and 38 junior dogs in the 12 to 18 month class. The other four classes had entries of 37, 32, 27 and 26, respectively.

Just 10 years ago there were only 75 total sweepstakes entries at the national specialty, and one judge was able to complete the assignment in roughly three hours. Now it takes two judges at least eight hours.

I mention these statistics simply to demonstrate the growing magnitude and complexity of national sweepstakes judging assignments. When there were no more than 100 entries at the national sweepstakes, well-known breeders who had never applied to become AKC-approved judges were routinely invited to judge. That tradition has not changed, despite a dramatic growth in the size of sweepstakes entries.

I do not question the extensive breed knowledge of most of the breeders who have judged the national sweepstakes in the past. However, when they are required to evaluate 30 or 40 puppies in a single class, I have serious concerns about the limitations of their judging experience. I venture that even the most respected and seasoned AKC-approved breeder-judges find this task to be a real challenge.

So why do we continue to choose breeders and exhibitors with little real judging experience to judge the national sweepstakes? Many of them have probably never judged a total entry of more than 40 or 50 Bulldog puppies at an AKC-sanctioned puppy match. In my opinion, the task of sorting out the four best puppies in a class of 40 should not be entrusted to the uninitiated, regardless of the person's knowledge of the breed.

Most veteran judges would probably agree with me that Bulldog puppies and junior dogs and bitches are far more difficult to judge with confidence than mature adults because they are not fully developed. For example, ears that appear too large for the head at 9 months will probably be just right at 2 years. Conversely, ears that are right at 9 months may be too small after the dog matures. While I believe that each entry must be judged on its merits on the day of the show, many good puppies are too severely penalized for immaturity. They should not have to look like adults.

Some argue that judging the national sweepstakes provides invaluable training for breeders who want to become AKC-licensed breed judges. But the record does not support the notion that most of them wish to achieve this. Since 1987, 20 people have judged the national sweepstakes. None were AKC-licensed judges when they judged the sweepstakes. Only three went on to become licensed judges; two others have recently applied.

It is indeed a great honor to be selected to judge the breed's national specialty sweepstakes. But people should not be chosen to judge simply to honor them. And there are many puppy matches and local specialty sweepstakes where aspiring judges can gain needed experience.

Puppies entered in the national sweepstakes represent the future of our breed. They deserve to be correctly evaluated at this very early stage by the most competent judges we can find. AKC-licensed breeder-judges with the proven ability to sort out the best from large classes are available for these assignments. We should be choosing them to judge the national sweepstakes.

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