

Tweaking The Top 20

By Marshall Stoner

During my brief stint on the GDCA Board a frequent subject brought to my attention by some of my Dane friends was our Great Dane Top 20. Not all the comments and opinions were negative but there were some suggestions to the effect that ours could use some consideration regarding possible changes which might improve our Top 20 experience. Sharing that opinion, I did a little asking around in the Great Dane community and was guided by a prominent Great Dane person to Michael Shepherd of mainly Boxer handler fame, but also has quite a bit of experience with Great Danes. He in turn referred me to Cheryl Robbins, who successfully exhibits Boxers, but more importantly, for my interests, pretty much manages the Boxer National's Top 20. I contacted her and found her to be not only knowledgeable regarding their event, but very enthusiastic and cooperative about sharing information. She even sent me a video of one of their recent shows. I have to admit to being intrigued about some of the differences between their and our events.

Here are some of those differences.

Judge selection: They use the same criterion as we do. A handler, an all-rounder, and a breeder. However, their selection system is different. They use an, as much as possible neutral committee, to select the judges. In other words, they attempt to keep politics out of the equation. Now I am aware that all human beings have opinions and it would be impossible to have a 100% neutral selection group, but it seems to me that this method would go a long way of eliminating the endless phone calls and calculating contacts which take place with our system.

Judging: They judge the dogs one at a time. Each dog's initial introduction is accompanied by music that each dog's owner selects. It begins as the dog enters the ring and continues as it circles the ring. The handler then takes the dog to the center of the ring. The music stops and the judges approach and begin the judging process. This includes the usual stacking, free baiting, down and backs, and profile movement. The judges fill out their forms, hand them to the steward who immediately takes them to the ringside official accountant for compilation. This continues until all dogs have been judged. Here is an important change, in my opinion. The winner is announced in a short period of time that night following judging. This puts the rest of the National in proper perspective. The way we do it the Best of Breed winner has about 2 ½ hours to enjoy their most important success at the National, before all attention goes to the Top 20 winner announcement at the Awards Dinner. To me, winning BOB at the National tops all other wins in our sport. I rate it higher than a BIS, BISS, Championship, Grand Championship, Number 1 Breed Stats and Number 1 All-Breed. Why, because it means on that occasion the winner is chosen over all the hundreds of the best Great Danes in the country that day in one ring in one event.

Top 20 Environment: The Boxer Top 20 is definitely less formal than ours. It starts with the music. It is an exciting time, more so for the individuals who have something to do with the dogs involved, but also for the general audience. Certainly there is a

place for our constituents to really put on their finest, and they should be encouraged to do so. But telling people what they can and should wear to the event is asinine. This lends to an elitist atmosphere which, in my opinion, discourages attendance and participation. This is one of the breed's highlight events and should be enjoyed by all. If fans want to wear a pair of blue jeans. So be it.

Along those lines the Boxer people do something that I believe really brings an all encompassing feel to the affair. They have what they call the "People's Choice" award.

Every attendee is given a ballot which includes the number of all dogs participating, not the name. All attendees are encouraged to vote at the conclusion of the exhibiting. The ballots are collected and tabulated, but results are not announced until later in the week so as not to take away from or conflict with the official decision.

Our event has a sort of somber feel to it. The over all mood is definitely different from a regular show. Especially when it is held in ball room rather than in a regular ring. I have heard more than one participant complain as to the artificialness of the atmosphere, and that it affects the dogs. Now I know our Great Danes are supposed to be able to handle all those varied situations, but!

"Great Dane number ??, please enter the room, circle the ring twice and stop a station number ? Step off the mat. Please free bait your dog, do not touch your dog (ha ha). Now stack your dog and stand between your dog and the judge while the judge goes over the dog. Now take your dog from station number ? to station number ? Now free bait your dog etc" repeated over and over. How many of you get tired of this dialogue. I believe it contributes to the formality of our event. There must be some method of educating the handlers as to the over all procedure so as to eliminate this monotonous litany.

Judges Score Sheets: I personally, really like this. The Boxer people make all judge score sheets public. All be it not on the night of the event. They become available later in the week. Our system allows only the score sheets of your dog to be available to owners and handlers. Critics of the Boxer system claim that judges would be reluctant to take the assignment under this arrangement. My stance is that if the judge is afraid of having their decisions made public, they just shouldn't take the assignment. I'm confident that there are enough honest and confident judges out there, that this would not be a factor in judge selection for such a prestigious event.

In conclusion, I'm sure there are folks out there who are perfectly happy with the way we are doing things right now. My good friends and owners of this year's winner may be among them. But as a breeder of this year's winner and a participant of several others in years past, I thought I'd put this out there for your consideration.