[Gr. 7 NF]

Top Dog

How did the Westminster Dog Show become so popular?

The winner of a prestigious award embarks on a media tour in New York City. Along the way, she visits the Empire State Building, meets celebrity business executive Donald Trump, and rings the bell to open the market at the New York Stock Exchange. These are noteworthy honors, and not just because they happened to an award winner—they happened to an award-winning *dog*!

In 2014, it was a fox terrier named Sadie that won Best in Show at the Westminster Dog Show, the highest award at this time-honored event. Dating back to 1877, the contest is second only to the Kentucky Derby (just by one year) in being the longest-running sporting event held in the United States. A group of sportsmen decided they wanted to showcase their dogs in one setting. They organized the first Westminster event, and received over 1,200 entries.

The show was an immediate success. It attracted tens of thousands of spectators. In fact, the organizers extended the first event, a three-day show, to four days based on its popularity and public interest. All proceeds from that additional day were donated to the American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals. This charity became the modern ASPCA.

By 1905, the Westminster Dog Show was the largest dog show in the world. Many famous people have participated in the show during its history. Businessman and philanthropist J. P. Morgan brought his Collies to the show in the 1890s. During the same time, journalist Nellie Bly showed her Maltese. Lou Gehrig, the famous New York Yankee, entered his German shepherd dog in the 1933 show.

Besides attracting famous visitors, Westminster is also known for its support of important causes. During 1918-1919, the show's profits were donated to the American Red Cross to support efforts during World War I. During World War II, proceeds from the show were donated to the American Red Cross, Dogs for Defense, and the National War Fund. In more recent years, Westminster established an annual scholarship for students of veterinary medicine. In 2006, the show recognized individuals and organizations in the dog community that had contributed in rescue and recovery work following the Gulf Coast hurricanes in the autumn of 2005.

Of course, the Westminster show is more than celebrity glamour and charity work. Dogs competing at the show must be champions that meet strict breed standards recognized by the American Kennel Club (AKC). A champion dog is one that has attended dog shows and earned a required number of points. During the show, a group of judges assesses each dog. They look for dogs that exhibit good temperament and overall good health.

Judges also examine each contestant to see how closely it meets the breed standard. Breed standard characteristics vary, depending on the breed. Anything from eye shape, fur markings, and nose color can be reviewed during judging. After the physical examination, judges watch each dog's movement while they are exhibited. Observing each dog's gait allows judges to see how all the breed standards display as the dog is in motion.

The modern Westminster show takes place over the course of two days. Tickets

are in high demand, and often the show sells out each day. Those who aren't lucky enough to purchase their ticket in time can still enjoy the show. Unlike the early days of the contest, viewers can enjoy the show from the comforts of their home. The show is nationally televised, and, in 2005, Westminster began streaming video coverage of its event on the Westminster Web site, www.westminsterkennelclub.org.

References

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