Dog Show Etiquette

Those Unwritten Rules

By Georgia Hymmen

Showing dogs at AKC conformation shows can be very confusing, especially to people new to the sport. It's hard enough to know and understand the AKC's written rules and regulations; after all, they are *in print* (although not always easily understandable) and can be quickly reviewed by simply going to the American Kennel Club's site at AKC.org.

However, a novice may feel there are secret "industry standards" for certain ringside procedures and are very difficult if not impossible to find out about--and to understand. Woe to the novice who breaks one of these unwritten rules as they may incur the wrath of other exhibitors. Meanwhile, they have no idea what they did wrong—or why it was a problem.

Some ringside etiquette is pretty easy to "get" and is actually just common courtesy both new and experienced folks should exhibit—being on time for your class and not holding up the judge or the ring, being respectful to the judge and other exhibitors no matter what your placement, being a gracious looser (and winner), congratulating the winners, and plain just being courteous. Other common ring etiquette includes not jamming up the ring entrance (especially if your class isn't the next one), having proper control of your dog, chatting up the judge prior to ring time, being sure to allow sufficient room between dogs both in and out of the ring and observe good "dog sense".

Two rules of etiquette that shouldn't even have to be mentioned; do NOT badmouth another exhibitor or dog ringside and NEVER EVER bring a sick or ill dog to a show (no matter how important that show is to you).

Entering More Than One Regular Class

A common mistake many new people make is entering more than one regular class. This error is common with people who come from a horse show background, as it's normal for them to enter multiple classes. There are several reasons why this is unadvisable; first, to compete in Winners, the dog must win **both** classes. Win one class, and only place in the other, and you don't get to compete in Winners. Next, on the judging schedule, the number of **entries** will reflect two for this dog but when

calculating points, only **one** animal would be counted. This could be especially problematic if the judging schedule reflected in a particular show was right on a major. Why is this? An exhibitor only needing a major will get to the show and find out it's not. Not only is this disappointing, but expensive; there may be travel, dog care for animals at home, and paying a handler involved.

Showing Minored Out Dogs At Minor Point Shows

If your dog has earned all the minor points he needs, and is only looking for majors, it's considered very bad form to show your dog at a minor point show if there is absolutely no possibility of getting a major at that show. There isn't any AKC rule preventing you from showing your dog, but the best your dog could do is simply earn points he or she doesn't need. And if the dog going Reserve to you ***does*** need those minor points, you've effectively taken them away from the dog that needs them. This can create hard feelings, especially if the exhibitor has traveled a long distance and perhaps hired a handler.

When you are major-hunting, it's a fact of life you will enter shows in which you end up pulling your dog from because they didn't make majors. Yes, it's upsetting to lose the entry fee (maybe you will be lucky and there will be a judge change and you can get a refund) but in the long-run it's the best thing to do.

However, before you pull your dog, be sure you know the available points in both your sex and the opposite one. If Best of Winners could give you a major, then certainly show your dog. You could get the crossover (Best of Winners) and get a major. There could be other scenarios that could give you a major, such if Winners Bitch went Best of Opposite over the Special bitches, and Winners Dog went Best of Winners or your dog goes Best of Breed and defeats Specials or gets a Group placement. These scenarios DO happen, so be sure you have a clear understanding of the possible scenarios and possible points available and decide if there is a possibility for a longshot major. But be realistic—if the only way you could get a major would be to go Breed from the classes, and your dog has never done much beyond going Winners—well, is it really a possibility?

If you are unclear on how to calculate points using different win scenarios, the show superintendents are usually happy to help; the information can also be found on the AKC site. Other exhibitors are usually willing to help.

Some people feel that you've paid your money and therefor can compete—there certainly isn't any rule where minored out dogs cannot be shown in minor shows, but consider how you would feel if you only needed one or two points, when to a show that entailed large expense, and a dog won over you who did not need the point.

The Best of Winners Scenario

If your dog won a major, and the other sex was only a minor win, it's considered "polite" to "let" the other dog go Best of Winners so they too will get a major at that show. In this case, etiquette would dictate the exhibitor of the major-winning dog "show down" his dog in the hope the judge will choose the other dog and that dog will also get a major. This scenario can be the basis for much contention if one exhibitor feels the other didn't "show down" their dog enough, or they "tried" too hard. In the end,

neither handler has control of who the judge points at; one can only hope the other dog will get the crossover.

Breaking Majors

Majors are hard to come by, and frequently take some effort to make sure there are enough entries present to hold. Casually breaking a major because one just doesn't feel like going because the ring time is too early or some similar reason is simply inexcusable. There probably are people who went to great effort and expense to get to the show--only to find out the major broke and now they have to pull their minored-out dog. ***However,*** people understand if a dog has to be pulled because they have hurt themselves or are ill. And of course, it goes without saying an ill dog should ***NEVER*** be brought to a show. Car problems, personal illness or family issues are all good reasons for pulling. If one must pull their dog from a major-entry show, it is very much appreciated by the other exhibitors if notice is given. This is pretty easy nowadays with Facebook and other social media platforms.

Keeping A Dog In The Classes Who Finished

Frequently, a dog will finish the first day of a show or circuit and moving them up will break the major. If the owner and other exhibitors are all in agreement, the dog might be left in the classes to hold the major. If that is done, the dog is usually shown "down" and by a person who is not normally seen in the ring. After all, the goal in this case is for the dog to **NOT** win! Remember—the ultimate decision is up to the owner, and if the owner wants to move their dog up to show in Breed, they certainly are entitled to.

Showing Bitches In Heat

AKC rules allow bitches to be shown in conformation when they are in season. However, as any owner of a large "interested" male knows, this can be a HUGE problem. While a few handlers of in-season bitches might purposely allow them to flaunt around their male competition, many bitch owners (having only owned bitches) do not realize how difficult it can be to hang onto 175 pounds of horny male Great Dane!

First and foremost, bitch owners planning on attending a show should put their girls on chlorophyll as soon as it's known they are coming into season. This will help a bit in masking the scent males find so attractive. The bitch should wear "britches" in the show area to prevent drips outside the ring area and these should be CLEAN. An application of Anti-Mating spray will also help with controlling the scent. Bitch owners should make it known their bitch is in season; and if crating her rinside, let other exhibitors know so they do not crate a male near her. (My suggestion is a bitch in season has a red bow on her crate.)

Bitch owners should also avoid being near the obedience, rally, and agility ring areas. Bitches in season are not allowed to compete in performance events, and having one in that area can negatively impact the performance of a male dog.

In Closing

There can be many different scenarios that can impact show etiquette; if a question arises talk it over with the experienced exhibitors, your breeder or your mentor for their input.

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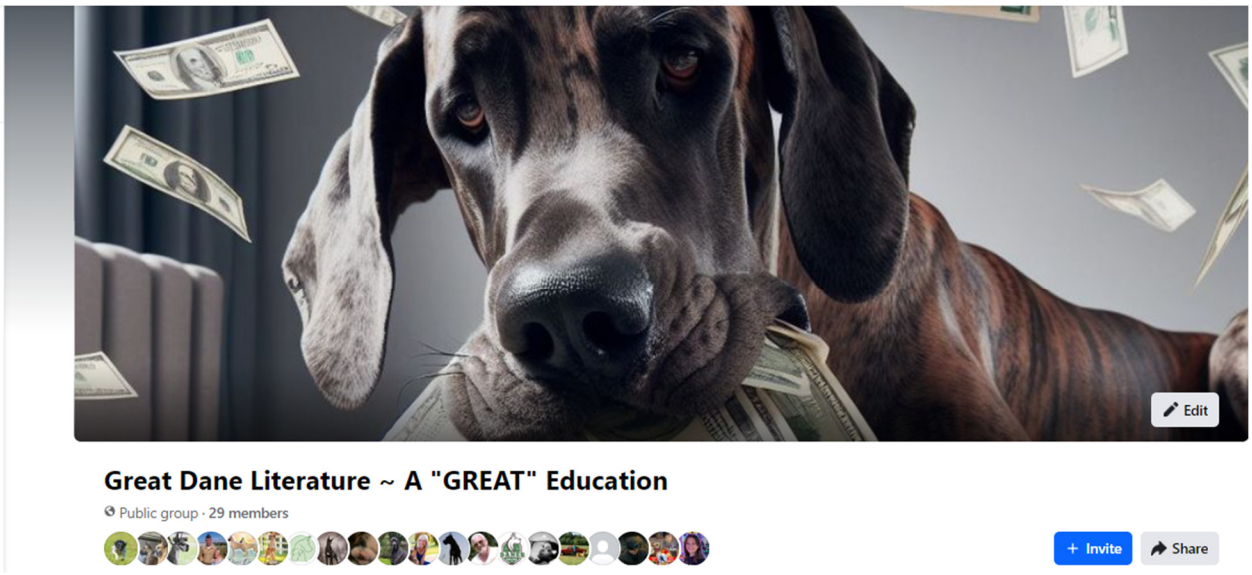
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