

So You Want To Be A Sighthound Judge ...

A report from the ranks of the clipboard clutchers

By Denise Flaim, Editor-at-Large, *Sighthound Review*

In the American dog world these days, it's the era of the clipboard clutcher. You see them ringside at all the significant dog shows, especially national specialties – aspiring judges thrusting inked forms at their newly found mentors, hoping to get one signature closer to another breed application.

It's important to document one's experience in dogs, of course, and few things are more valuable than getting in-person tutelage on the virtues and vices of a group of quality dogs. But the clipboard has come to symbolize what can go wrong with the AKC's new, more liberal judging-approval process, which in the worst cases permits a shallowness of knowledge that is inversely proportional to the applicant's level of ambition.

Arguably, there's never been a more level playing field for becoming an AKC judge. Once a judge's initial breed is applied for and approved status is granted, that penny-bright judge can go on to apply for additional breeds – as many as 16 if she is a total newbie, 25 or so if she has fewer than four Groups, and 32 if she has more than that. For each breed, prospective judges must acquire ten “continuing education points,” or CEUs, before applying to judge it. (Only five are required in low-entry breeds, which in Sighthounds includes Cirnechi dell'Etna, Ibizan and Pharaoh Hounds, Scottish Deerhounds, Portuguese Podengo Pequenos, Sloughis and Greyhounds.) CEUs are earned in a variety of ways: Going to a national specialty, a breed-specific seminar, or a lure-coursing event where that breed is running earns you two CEUs the first time you attend; the second time is only worth one point. Ringside mentoring with a major entry is three CEUs, as is an in-ring apprenticeship, and so on.

As someone who has newly joined the ranks of the clipboard clutchers – though I prefer a more discrete folder, thank you – I think a lot about the process of learning about new breeds. What's the best way to begin? What's the best way to absorb this new information? And, most important, how do you know when you might be ready to actually apply?

For me, that last question has less to do with adding up to that magical number of 10 CEUs, and more to do with my internal sense of readiness. One approach is analytical, the other is instinctual, but isn't good judging a balance of both those sides of our brains anyway? Venturing out of your own breed into another – even if that other breed is in the same Group, and even if it is related to some degree – invariably brings culture shock. Words, for example, mean different things in different breeds, and sometimes you have to sit quietly, like an anthropologist in the fire circle of a mouth-clacking tribe, to decipher them.

Consider “houndy.” I heard the term multiple times at the Afghan Hound national this year, always in the context of a good-quality dog. But in my breed, Rhodesian Ridgebacks, “houndy” has a decidedly negative connotation, referring to a dog that is too fleshy, too pendulous-eared – in short, one who is made in an incorrect Scenthound cast. I finally ventured to ask well-known Sighthound specialist Espen Engh, who had been mentoring me throughout the show, about what “houndy” meant in the Afghan Hound lexicon. After some deconstruction, I came to understand that it means Sighthoundy – in Afghan circles, at least.

Mystery solved.

Espen also gave me a wonderful pearl when I was struggling to decide how I would theoretically place two rather faulty exhibits in a class of four.

“Which one should be third, and which one fourth?” I wondered aloud. “What would you do?”

“Don't corrupt your eye by focusing on inferior dogs,” scolded Espen, who

doesn't take credit for that line – he got it from the late Michele Billings. “Save your energy for sorting out the good ones.”

In retrospect, advice like that seems obvious, but when you are a new learner at this judging business, it really isn't. And it's related to another obvious thing that you soon figure out for yourself: When you are first getting to know a breed, you can't learn from a mediocre entry. In fact, the odds are good that you will walk away from ringside more confused than when you first sat down. A good friend says this happened to him with Whippets, a breed he now judges with proficiency and pleasure. But as an aspiring judge, after watching several entries that were of average quality at best, he despaired of that elusive light bulb ever illuminating above his head. Then he went to the national, saw the best of the best – and channeled Thomas Edison in spades.

I have learned to apply this to mentors, too. If I don't think someone is a good judge in my breed, I don't ask to sit with them ringside with their own. “Don't take advice from people who have always been unsuccessful breeders,” Raymond Oppenheimer of Bull Terrier fame once said. “If their opinions were worth having, they would have proved it by their successes.”

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You could just as easily substitute the word “judges” for “breeders.”

Last month, Susan St. John Brown drove out to a dog show specifically to mentor several of us in her breed, which is, of course, Ibizan Hounds. Susan arrived with a book she had created and professionally bound that had excellent examples of the breed to set our eye on, as well as comparisons between the Ibizan and Pharaoh. Then we sat at ringside for the Ibizan entry, which had majors in both sexes. Susan had a clear idea of what to prioritize in her breed – including the details of its very specific gait and front structure – and she communicated it succinctly and clearly, right down to her visual aids, which we took cell-phone shots of. Not all great judges, or breeders, for that matter, are able to articulate what they see or think, as many a disappointed student has discovered.

While images are important, words are, too. Learning a breed starts with reading its standard, which seems pretty self-evident. But by reading, I don’t mean just skimming, or even reading through once or twice. I mean a deep scouring – Talmudic is the adjective that comes to mind – which is only possible over multiple sittings. Standards are no different from great books in that they give you new revelations each time you revisit them. There’s a special kind of alchemy to that, but the catalyst is not the static words on the page – it’s the reader’s experience. Each time we bring our evolving selves to a standard – including our most recent experiences and, yes, our mistakes – we find layers and nuances we didn’t have the antennae for on previous readings.

At the recent Basset Hound national – yes, I’m learning those breeds, too – well-known Hound judge Kitty Steidel was surprised to hear that the friend whom I was traveling with and I had read the standard aloud to each other the night before. (Surprised in a good way.) After all, what better way is there to get a standard’s specific words and general essence into your mental muscle memory?

That same friend, Neil McDevitt, uses what he calls a “study sheet” for each breed he is learning. He adapted this outline from a hand-out he got from Kitty when she presented judges’ education at the PBGV national. At the top, he jots down all the

disqualifications that apply to the breed. Next come the purpose of the breed and its history, followed by six or so adjectives that describe the breed. Then there are the anatomical parts – head, ears, eyes, nose, bite and so on – as well as important traits such as proportion, temperament and gait.

It sounds basic, and it is, but it’s also a good exercise for distilling what’s essential in a breed and what’s just window-dressing.

Sometimes, though, a standard doesn’t help a judge – or at least not at first glance. Out for dinner one night at the Afghan Hound national with the Reisman sisters – Carol, Honi and Fran, as if I have to name them – along with Susan Sprung and June Matarazzo, the conversation turned to Afghan Hound croups. Carol made the point that the distinctive croup of the Afghan Hound isn’t even mentioned in

the AKC standard. I whipped out my iPad, and she was right, of course. But as we talked our way through it, we considered the breed’s equally distinctive prominent

hip bones – which are mentioned in the standard. Can you have prominent hip bones without a tilted pelvis and a steep croup, and so is the answer there in the standard, just waiting for a little extrapolation?

I have conversations like that about my own breed all the time, sometimes with experienced and respected judges who know Ridgebacks well enough to have judged some of our most prestigious entries. But they never stop seeking out breeders’ opinions on the questions that bubble up in their judging: Do they put up the exceptional dog with the single crown, a serious fault, in an otherwise lackluster entry? What about if that dog has white up to the pastern, or a stripe up his neck? What do they do about an obviously kinked tail, when the standard does not address it?

Earlier this year at a dog show, I walked over to greet a friend who is a highly respected Hound judge – all the more impressive because it’s not the group he came out of. He was all alone, perched on the corner of a grooming table outside the ring, rocking his dangling leg absently, watching a respected Sighthound breeder-judge who was adjudicating two rings away. We watched as she awarded Breed to a dog he hadn’t even gotten a ribbon the

day before. “I’m going to have to talk to her later,” he mused, “because maybe I’m missing something. I thought that dog was a little too extreme, but maybe I need to rethink that.”

A judge like that could simply coast on credentials, and on his record of finding and placing good dogs, which isn’t rivaled by many others. But a static view of the breed wasn’t going to cut it for him. He wanted to evolve.

For me, watching him underscored the fact that we never master any one breed completely – not even, for that matter, our own. There is always more to learn, always more room to refine, always that next mistake lurking in wait to become our next learning opportunity – that is, if you are looking for it.

Perhaps that’s why the clipboard is such a powerful symbol of what’s wrong with how some approach this process: as if it is a finite one, like accepting a shipment of knowledge at your intellectual loading dock. Sign the invoice, and you’re done. But inventory, like knowledge, is never static – or at least it shouldn’t be if you want either to grow.



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Newsday. After publishing several niche magazines for dog fanciers (including, at one time, this one!), Denise now publishes fine dog books under her Revodana Publishing imprint. She is a board member of the Morris & Essex Kennel Club, and a member of the Rhodesian Ridgeback Club of the United States and the Western Hound Association of Southern California. Denise lives on Long Island with her husband Fred, their 13-year-old triplets (also known as “the two-legged litter”), and three Rhodesian Ridgebacks.