

A New Dog Show Class!

The new regular dog show class is called the Amateur Owner Handler Class (AOH). It may be offered at shows after January 1, 2009. Here is how it appears in the proposed change to “Rules Applying to Dog Shows.”

“The Amateur-Owner-Handler class shall be for dogs that are at least six months of age who are not champions. Dogs must be handled in the class by the registered owner of the dog. This class is restricted to exhibitors who have not, at any point in time, been a professional dog handler, AKC approved conformation judge, or employed as an assistant to a professional handler. Additionally, members of the immediate family or household of a current professional handler are ineligible for this class. “(Chapter 3.3.7).

How and why did this new dog show class come into being? It was developed in response to an action item in the AKC’s Strategic Plan, as a way to encourage participation at conformation events. The strategic plan cited a study that showed that a significant number of new exhibitors enter about a dozen shows, then abandon the sport.

Will a new class aimed at new owner exhibitors stem this tide?

I attended the AKC Delegate meeting at which the proposal came to the floor. The class became quite an emotional issue, and in the course of discussions, interesting questions emerged:

- Would this class actually entice new exhibitors?
- How can amateur status be identified and enforced without it becoming an administrative nightmare?
- Would the class really assist newcomers since the way the rule is written, a person could consider himself as an "amateur" forever?
- Would the AOH class eventually evolve into a class for the seasoned, non-pro handler?
- If the goal is to keep the new exhibitor from competing with professionals wouldn't the new class simply postpone that meeting until Winners class?
- Would the new exhibitor view the term “amateur” as pejorative?

There may be a “perfect storm” brewing in the dog show world. Entries are declining, while costs are rising, and there appears to be a scaling-back on discretionary spending by many exhibitors, thanks to escalating gas prices. None of these issues bode well for participation by new exhibitors.

Will the creation of the AOH class help? Only time will tell. We need to develop good statistics on how the AOH class is used, analyze these numbers, and only then decide if the new class is giving the desired results.

We all understand that we lose too many newcomers in the sport and need a way to encourage them to stay. What can you do personally to keep our sport robust with new, eager participants? Think back to when you first started showing dogs and how much a kind, encouraging word from your breeder or from a respected, seasoned exhibitor meant to you? Next time you're at a show, take a moment away from the competition or socializing with your buddies, and treat the obviously new exhibitor as a welcomed addition to the sport. A few moments of your time and interest could motivate and convince the newcomer that showing dogs should become part of his or her life too.

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