

# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

Dr. Gerard C. Penta

On behalf of the Board of Directors of the American Dog Show judges I wish to thank Janet Wilcox for her many years as an ADSJ Director. In addition to her loyal service on the board, Janet served this organization as vice-president during my first two years as president. I will always be indebted to her for her support and council during that period. More recently she has served as our coordinator for non-periodic publications. The board regrets that Janet's physical problems have led her to resign her position on the board. We wish her the very best and hope to keep in touch for many years to come.

The board has elected Jean Fournier to fill the seat vacated by Mrs. Wilcox. Jean has been a member of ADSJ for over twelve years. A breeder-judge of Siberian Huskies, Jean has served as a breed presenter at the ADSJ Advanced Institute and she is a member of our Constitution Committee. Jean, the ADSJ Board of Directors is pleased to welcome you.

As you are all well aware, the AKC Board has approved some major changes to the judging approval process and passed a conflict of interest policy.

The idea of restricting AKC approved judges from judging at the shows of competing registries was suggested during a conversation at a private social gathering in February of this year. The AKC Board member promoting the concept was asking what Carl Liepmann and I thought of it. We told him we were opposed to the idea of restricting a judge's opportunity to judge at non-AKC events. We also raised the restraint-of-trade issue. The conversation was brief and Carl and I assumed the AKC Board member was just using us as a sounding board for an obviously controversial idea which had little or no chance of ever becoming AKC policy. We never heard another word about it, which only reinforced our impression that it was not a proposal being given serious consideration.

In the recent past, the AKC had requested our organization's views on other issues and, when given enough lead time, we polled our members on the issue. When time was too short for this, we gave them our best thoughts and cooperation. Imagine our surprise then when we learned that a conflict-of-interest policy, containing this judging restriction, was voted on at the May meeting of the AKC board and was now official AKC policy. Surely, that brief casual exchange in February, which started with, "What do you fellas think about this idea...", would not be considered as a request for ADSJ input. Of course, the AKC is under no obligation to consult

with ADSJ prior to drafting proposals which have an impact upon judges. However, recently it did seem as though they had come to the realization that it may be of value to do so. In response to their willingness to consult with us, we have been pleased to cooperate most fully in providing reasonable, constructive responses. I can only guess that this time they thought they knew what we would say, so why bother asking.

Now much has been said and written about the conflict-of-interest policy since it has been publicized. Some of the criticisms reflect the initial reaction that Carl and I had back in February. However, we are not attorneys, and so the questions concerning the legality of these judging restrictions in the context of restraint-of-trade laws may have to be settled in the proper forum.

There are only two points I wish to make at this time regarding the substance of these judging restrictions. First, the rationale the AKC has offered for these restrictions cuts both ways. The AKC argues that it spends a great deal of time and money to insure quality judges for AKC shows and does not want to see competing registries or event-sponsoring organizations reap the benefit of that investment. While one can easily sympathize with this rationale, it will seem to many as hypocritical with regard to those breed registries whose judges were given AKC approval to judge at AKC shows when the breed was first recognized by AKC. It seems only just to make an exception from this policy for those judges who were already judging for the original breed registry.

Secondly, as unwelcome as the idea of a judging restriction is, at least, as it is written, it only applies to breeds for which the judge is AKC approved. I understand that there are some AKC board members who would like to see a policy that prohibits an AKC approved judge from judging any breeds at non-AKC events. An extension of the policy in that direction would limit the learning experiences of our judges. Obviously, match shows, those one-time readily available training grounds for judges, exhibitors and their dogs, have been greatly reduced in number. It would be a further limitation on the availability of such valuable pre-approval judging experiences if the new judging restriction were to be extended to all breeds.

It is especially disappointing that the ADSJ officers and board members were never even made aware of the fact that the recent changes in the judging approval process were under consideration, let alone asked for their thoughts on the proposed changes.

In fact, quite the contrary.

Over lunch at a show on April first, a couple of judges told me they had heard that the in-ring observation program was being discontinued. I did not believe it since the AKC had just recently approved in-ring observations with certain foreign judges. Nonetheless, I promised to check into the matter.

The following week I called Peter Gaeta and asked if there was any truth to the rumor. Peter assured me there was not. He said that the question of whether or not to continue the program comes up occasionally, but the current plan is to strengthen the in-ring program, not to abandon it. His comments reassured me and based on his comments I reassured others.

Now don't misunderstand, I am not suggesting that Peter was intentionally trying to deceive me, but rather, he may have been unaware of his superiors' plans for this program. If that's the case, it is troubling in itself. We would hate to think that, if we ask for a clarification or guidance on a judging matter, the Director of Judging Operations may have been kept in the dark on the issue. After all, if we wish to discuss judging matters, he is the person to whom we should be referred.

Here again, it may be that the AKC did not feel it would be fruitful to consult us on the matter of the in-ring observation program since they already knew where we stood on the program. A few years ago we delivered to the AKC the results of our member survey which, among other things, showed that 62% of our members thought the observer program was worthwhile with only 27% saying it was not.

In discontinuing the in-ring observer program I'm afraid the AKC has thrown the baby out with the bathwater. The program provided a wonderful opportunity to see an entry up close from the vantage point of the officiating judge (eyes, teeth, bite, movement, etc.) while having the opportunity to ask a question and hear confidential comments about specific exhibits and the entry as a whole. The discussion of an entry with a qualified judge with whom one has shared all but the hands-on examination of the dogs should be a very valuable educational experience, as it has been for so many.

My main concern with this change is that an educationally valuable component has been lost to judges and its replacement, ringside mentoring, will not be as worthwhile or as available. The result is a net loss in opportunity to learn about a new breed in ways that satisfy the required components.

I am told that part of the reason for the discontinuance of the program was that some clubs and some high profile judges no longer wished to

participate. The Judges Department also received complaints about the program from exhibitors.

To be sure, the majority of the problems surrounding this program can be traced back to numerous abuses of the program by a minority of participants. I won't list the many abuses, but believe me, all were avoidable with proper supervision and a tightening of requirements and procedures. If the new ringside observation program is as inattentively administered as was the in-ring observer program, there will surely be at least as many, if not more, abuses than were evident with the in-ring program. The big difference?--clubs and high profile judges will not be complaining to the Judges Department.

Peter Gaeta was on the right track when he spoke of strengthening the program. We would be pleased to work with him to develop an improved in-ring observer program.

So what's so wrong with the new ringside observation program? Well, aside from the fact that the observer no longer has the same vantage point as the judge and has probably lost the instructive comments of a relatively objective expert speaking from the perspective of an adjudicating judge, there are also a few political and logistical problems.

As to the political problems let me just say we will have AKC approved mentors based on their meeting the qualifications, and then there will be the parent club approved mentors. Need I say more? I have found through my dealings with the parent clubs that most of them are great. However, to paraphrase the breed videos, "some are less so, but all will help your understanding of human nature."

The political problems implied in the above may be a nuisance, but a manageable one. However, I think the logistical problems are going to be so difficult as to render the program inaccessible.

For the sake of example, let's say that at an upcoming all-breed show there is usually a major entry in a breed you are preparing to judge. To get to this show will require gas and tolls to drive to the airport, paying for parking, airfare, at least one night in a motel and your meals away from home. You may even have to pay for admission to the show. The costs involved are nothing new to judges who travel to satisfy required educational components. However, in this instance, you don't know that the trip will actually yield the qualifying educational experience you are hoping for. Unless there has been an advertised ringside tutoring program (usually only offered at some specialty shows), you will have to gamble that there will be a qualified mentor available and willing to mentor you when this breed is in the ring.

Who are most likely to be qualified to mentor you at this show? That's right, the exhibitors. I am told that the AKC will not allow people to act as ringside mentors at shows where they are exhibiting. A wise decision. Couldn't you just imagine the uproar if a competitor sat with a group of judges and proceeded to critique the other exhibitors' dogs!

So what are your remaining options? Judges on the panel? They may be judging when the breed you are studying is in the ring. A qualified breeder with 12-years experience who is not entered at the show? How do you know who that is? If you do know one, is the mentor going to travel to the show at his or her own expense to mentor you? Are you going to pay for the mentor's expenses? Will the breed's parent club? Will the all-breed clubs make these arrangements for you in each of the breeds you are studying? Will there actually be a major to watch?

Perhaps the gods were with you and all the planets were in perfect alignment. You did it, you arranged a ringside mentoring experience that will actually count. Great! Good for you! Now you must do it two more times to satisfy this component. Common sense tells you that somewhere down the road you are going to roll the dice and lose.

This "crap shoot" component is the replacement for the in-ring observer program in which you knew a qualified judge had agreed to accept you as an observer, and you had the show chairman's approval, before you ever checked the air fares.

Dropping the in-ring program was a mistake that we can only hope can somehow be corrected. If not, our options for satisfying the requirements have been reduced and a valuable learning experience has been lost.

Finally, there is the delicate matter of taking breeds away. At one time I naively believed that once a person was approved to judge a breed, barring physical incapacity, the breed approval should never be taken away. I thought the market would take care of those who may have lost their competency to a judge the breed.

I was wrong. In the dog show world it doesn't seem to work that way. At least not to the extent necessary to sufficiently protect the breeds from incompetent judging. As in any profession, there needs to be a fair, objective and relevant process for correcting or eliminating true incompetence.

On this issue the Judges Department did request input. We raised a caution about having one method of screening for the original approval to judge a breed and a more difficult method for those who may warrant a reevaluation. Such a double standard would be unfair and would no doubt invite lawsuits.

The new policy does avoid this and to that extent it is equitable. Also, if the current approval process is deemed adequate, then it is reasonable to apply the same screening process under a probationary program of reevaluation. But, is the current approval process adequate? The short answer is no, and the new reevaluation process has the same Achilles heel as the approval process. Namely, all field reps are not competent to evaluate judging performance in all breeds.

While a process for taking breeds away may be necessary, we advised the AKC to, "...hold off on any plans to remove breeds until it has put in place a fair, objective and relevant approval process." The cart may now be before the horse. Implementation of the new reevaluation process will surely raise anew the basic flaw in the current system of evaluating judging performance - the competency of the evaluator.

If you don't like the recent changes, don't worry, as the old saying goes, we never step in the same stream twice.

Have a great summer.\*