

# The Judge's Eye

## Judges' Education: A Model Program

By Jessica Watson and Cynthia Stewart

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As members of the Mastiff Club of America (MCOA), we are proud that our judges' education program is often cited by AKC judges as one of the best. In fact, the recent changes in AKC judges' education guidelines were, in large part, modeled on our program. But MCOA judges' education did not come into existence overnight – it has been a labor of love by many talented Mastiffs breeders, and has evolved over the past 15 years. Our program relies on several critical elements: two strong club committees, working in tandem; a stellar group of presenters and mentors; exceptional dogs for hands-on examination; and continuous feedback and evaluation of the program.

### TWO COMMITTEES: BETTER THAN ONE

The judges' education committee is composed primarily of our breeder-judges. This committee reviews and revises the presentation, breed-standard booklet, and seminar materials on an ongoing basis. It is also responsible for reviewing and approving completed applications and examinations for both presenters and mentors. Another of the committee's responsibilities is to review breed-seminar requests from other judges' education groups and to recommend whether the MCOA should participate. (In general, our committee has concluded that a prospective Mastiff judge is best educated at the MCOA national specialty.)

A separate committee, the judges' education seminar committee, is made up of four people whose talents are in organization and administration. This committee is responsible for the administrative details of the judges' education program – scheduling presenters, mentors, equipment, physical space, and dogs for the hands-on examination. One club member is designated judges' education coordinator: she chairs the seminar committee and also serves on the judges' education committee, so that the work of the two groups is coordinated.

The MCOA does not charge a fee for the judges' education seminar or for seminar materials. MCOA's philosophy is that our club has an obligation to educate Mastiff judges. Attendance at the seminar is by invitation only: Any licensed judge, provisional judge, or provisional applicant who wants to attend is invited, but the

MCOA general membership is not included. We have found that if seminar attendance is limited to judges, we stay focused on the objective – the breed standard – and do not stray into breeding issues. (The MCOA also sponsors an extensive membership-education program.)

Our judges' education program takes place over three days. Ringside mentoring, in a cordoned-off area, is held on the morning of class-dog judging. In the afternoon, we allocate 3 ½ hours to the actual seminar – 1 ½ hours for the presentation and discussion, and two hours for the hands-on examination. The lecture portion of the seminar involves three different presenters: One presents the history of the breed; another presents the breed standard and the third conduct the hands-on demonstration. Ringside mentoring is provided over the following two days, during class-bitch judging and Best of Breed class.

### Mentors and Presenters

Mentors are the linchpin of a successful judges' education program. Acceptance as a MCOA mentor requires meeting stringent criteria (very similar to what the AKC requires of its judge applicants) and passing both a breed-standard and a canine-anatomy test. Our mentors include breeders and owners of most of the top-winning Mastiffs in history, as well as all eight of our breeder-judges. Collectively, our 23 mentors have over 500 years' experience in the breed. Twelve mentors are also approved seminar presenters.

We invite all our mentors to each seminar – and they do attend – so the judge-attendees can reap the benefit of their knowledge. We also schedule mentors to ringside-mentor several shifts during the three days of regular-class judging at our national. Ideally, we like to organize our ringside mentoring area so there is one mentor for each attending judge. We also ask the mentors to rotate, to allow each judge to be mentored by several different people.

Judge-attendees have given extremely favorable reviews to our hands-on demonstrations. Rather than just grabbing dogs from ringside the day before the seminar, we invite carefully selected Mastiffs weeks in advance. First we study the Top 20 list from the previous year and eliminate any animals not owned by the MCOA members. From the remaining candidates, we choose the most highly rated ones that include two fawn dogs, two fawn bitches, one apricot dog, one apricot bitch, one brindle dog and one brindle bitch. Although we don't necessarily have the "best" eight Mastiffs at the hands-on demonstration, we have a majority of the best. Also important is the fact that we are confident we're working with experienced show dogs who can handle the stress of two hours in the "ring," being examined by many different people.

To begin the demonstration, the Mastiffs enter with their handlers. We assign a senior mentor to each dog and divide our judges into small groups. Each group of judges examines every Mastiff and discusses the virtues with both the mentor and the handler. We encourage handlers to have input in the discussion – after all, who know the dogs’ strengths better than they do?

All discussions about the hands-on dogs, and during ringside mentoring, are 100 percent positive. Everyone knows there is no perfect dog, so our efforts are directed toward recognizing and emphasizing the positive attributes of each exhibit. Our hands-on presenter makes clear that the judges will *never again* have such fabulous quality in their ring – unless they judge our national specialty.

After each judge has examined and discussed every Mastiff, the dogs are moved individually and as a group. At that time, each judge is asked to choose Best of Breed and Best of Opposite Sex, and to justify his choices to the entire group. There are no bad choices – these are all top-winning dogs- but the presenters want to ensure that the judges are making their choices for the correct reasons. The entire group discusses the individual picks and the reasoning behind the choices.

Although we are often asked to present dogs with faults at our hands-on demonstrations, we do not. This past year, several judges requested that we present Mastiffs of various ages. This, we felt, was a valid point: Mastiffs, especially males, change enormously between the ages of 6 to 24 months, and go through some “interesting” growth stages. In 2008, we will invite the class-dog winners from earlier in the day to the seminar room for a closer look by the judges and a discussion of the breed’s various growth stages.

At the conclusion of the hands-on demonstration, the judges are asked to complete an evaluation of the seminar. Some comments we’ve received include, “I can only hope that other breed clubs will follow your lead” and “Other national clubs should follow this club’s example!”

We would be very pleased if our MCOA judges’ education program were to be used as a model for other clubs. Although our program requires a lot of work by many people, we are amply rewarded by the result: knowledgeable judges. We are confident they have gained and appreciation for our breed, and an eye for the superior exhibit.

Jessica Watson has been the MCOA’s Judges’ Education Coordinator for 13 years. Cynthia Stewart serves as Member’s Education Coordinator for the MCOA.