

Canine Partners Being Exhibited in Junior Showmanship

Submitted by Nancy Fisk, Chair of the Delegate Junior Sub-Committee

The AKC Board, approved at its January meeting , a proposal submitted by AKC Staff and unanimously approved by the Delegate Junior Sub-Committee, to allow Canine Partners to be exhibited in Junior Showmanship. This will be an 18-month pilot program.

The Delegate Juniors Subcommittee, appointed by the Delegate Coordinating Committee, includes a representative from each of the Delegate Committees, two ad hoc committee members with valuable 4-H expertise, as well as Michael Knight, AKC Board and Mari-Beth O'Neill, AKC Staff. The committee's goal is to develop a "Best Practices" living document to assist clubs in attracting, engaging, and retaining juniors and young adults. Each committee member brings a unique perspective and approach to addressing this goal.

In an effort to attract and engage Juniors and their families into the Conformation aspect of our sport the Sub-Committee members looked at the successful 4-H programs and how they encourage young people to learn about and compete with their dogs in all aspects of canine sport, including in Junior showmanship competitions. The 4-H and UKC Showmanship Competitions include children with Canine Partners, as well as purebred dogs. Canine Partner dogs are already competing in our AKC Companion and Performance events, so Juniors may compete with their family dogs there, but those same children have not been encouraged or welcomed into the AKC Conformation world.

Some All-Breed Shows include Companion events, but many do not. Often the Conformation world remains elusive, intimidating and out of reach to those kids and their families, even if they have taken advantage of the opportunity to compete in AKC Companion or Performance events. To exclude these prospective young and energetic members from our clubs and our sport at a time when we are seeing not only a graying and shrinking of our membership, but a shrinking of entries and overall participation seems like a recipe for dooming our existence.

The Junior Showmanship event is not about the dog being exhibited, but about the Junior and their skill in presenting that dog correctly. The Canine Partner dog would be clearly entered as a neutered Canine Partner, with its Canine Partner number on the entry form. The Junior exhibitor would designate on the entry the breed their dog most closely resembles and would be judged on his or her ability to present the dog according to that breed standard. This requires that the child learn that breed's standard and understand the nuances of showing it correctly. The eligibility of Canine Partners to be entered in Conformation Junior Showmanship is limited to All-Breed shows, or events holding All-Breed Junior Showmanship, not Specialty Shows.

Those Juniors who do choose to take advantage of the ability to show their Canine Partners would start their entry into the Junior Showmanship ring in the Novice Class, and would need to advance from there, just as any other Junior does. It is there that the opportunity exists for Clubs and members of our sport to kindly reach out to them, welcome and include them; teaching them about the joys of our purebred dog world and all it has to offer. It is up to us to take advantage of the opportunity to build bridges between these young people, their families and our world, or we can choose to alienate them and chase them away, depriving ourselves of a much needed infusion of dog loving people .

When the Canine Partners joined the Companion and Performance world there was much concern that it would be bad for AKC and Purebred dogs. It is estimated that the total non-purebreds competing in those sports number only approximately 5 to 10 %. The sky did not fall.

No one is suggesting that the Canine Partner dogs be elevated to a place of recognition in our Conformation sport, other than to be a means to allow children to venture into our world. With nurturing and kindness from our clubs and our exhibitors, these kids may become purebred dog enthusiasts and hopefully find a breed that they will devote themselves to for a lifetime. They may well become the preservation breeders of our future.

For judges concerned about how to judge these children and their dogs, the judging Operations Department will be providing procedural information. Many Juniors Judges have already had an opportunity to judge these competitions at 4-H shows.

The Sub-Committee has heard the concerns raised about the introduction of Canine Partners dogs into the Junior Showmanship competition by many in the sport. The Sub-Committee will therefore raise the possibility to the AKC Board of introducing this pilot program as an option for clubs that may wish to opt-out.