

People with Disabilities in the Dog Show Ring: Part 3 of a 3 part article intended for CKC Dog Judges Dr. Gail Forsythe

The final part of this article looks at the personal experiences of dog show judges who have a disability. Part 3 was to include some practical suggestions for judges. Those suggestions become obvious when one reads the real life challenges faced by people with disabilities. The reactions they experienced, and solutions achieved in order to continue to participate in the dog show community are very moving.

In 2005, I requested personal contributions from members with disabilities of Judges-L and the Canadian Dog Judges Association. These two groups represent hundreds of dog show judges all over the world. Based on statistics in the general population, about 10-15% of people are disabled. As a group, dog show judges are more mature than the general population; therefore, it is highly probable that more than 15% of this group have a disability. (The term "disability" is legally defined in Canada to include physical and psychological medical conditions, addictions, and chemical sensitivities.)

Six people responded with their personal comments or stories. Although small in number in proportion to the number of dog show judges that are likely to have a disability, these six responses are compelling and enlightening. I am very grateful to these individuals for their contributions and their candour. Their responses have been edited to the extent necessary to preserve anonymity. Unfortunately, some of the more heart wrenching and heart warming details were excluded as a result of the editing process.

Response #1

The *Americans With Disabilities Act* (the "ADA"), requires that public facilities be handicapped accessible. Basically the Act was intended for people with mobility problems. In office buildings that have a defined capacity, devices for visually, and hearing impaired persons, must be installed. In all facilities fire alarm systems must display visual and auditory alarms.

Reasonable accommodations shall be made to allow a person with a disability to remain at their job. This includes making changes to the job task, or how the task is performed. These are "adaptive" changes. This may require job modification. If a person is unable to return to their vocation prior to the disability, they may be eligible for vocational rehabilitation training.

Response #2

When I suffered an injury, I cancelled my assignments because I couldn't have appropriate accommodation at that time. Now all is healed and I'm back, glad to be among the non-disabled cadre. When my all-breed club had judges needing some accommodation, it has always been for those folks who couldn't walk very far. Our only accommodation seemed to be that we would have the ring steward call in for a golf cart for transportation as needed. Or we would transport the judge to the ring in the morning and after lunch. Otherwise, the accommodation was non-existent, as far as I can tell. However, to be fair, judges do need to be able to provide the minimum of service which is to be somewhat mobile in the ring.

Several years ago a dog show was judged by someone who was critically ill. The judge used a wheelchair. The dogs were very good and the people were exemplary. The judge had to rest periodically and take medication; we just hung out and relaxed during these short breaks. I thought this was an amazing example of courage on the judge's part (the judge was in more or less continual pain).

The judge died shortly after this show. We all felt we had contributed to making the judge's last days as pleasant and rewarding as possible. The judge did a very good job of selecting dogs, too.

Response #3

I also have what is known as a 30% Permanent Partial Disability of the whole body. For me personally, I must identify limitations and liabilities. If the show grounds are very uneven, I am unable to judge. I place a personal limit on the number of assignments I accept. It is important to evaluate the sitting, standing, walking, bending, reaching, stooping, etc. Each person should be able to identify their functional limitations, and adapt accordingly. I had several surgeries for my disability. I have a positive attitude, and focus on what I can do not what I can't.

Response #4

I was one of the first judges to use a wheelchair in a ring. I suffered from a temporary problem that took several years and several operations to clear. I have been well for years now, yet people still ask how is my "x"?

Problems faced: Making people believe you can judge without upsetting the dogs in your ring. How did I do it? When going to see the line up I did not roll my chair anywhere near the dogs and used the opposite side of the ring. No dog was upset way over there. When it came to examining the dogs I could stand for a few moments to examine (my balance was good). I would lock the wheels and have the dogs gait down and back. If I had to sit, I did. I also stood when examining larger breeds. A lot of the dogs thought it was great to have a little person waiting at the end of the down and back.

The AKC sent two representatives to observe while I judged using the wheelchair. Their feedback was that everything was fine and there were no problems.

The one bad experience of the whole thing was a Show Chair's attitude. When the Show Chair learned I would be using a wheelchair, I was told not to come. My response was "like heck, I will be there, and I will bring my lawyer if I must." That response ended the problem.

My temporary disability was not a problem for the dogs I judged for those several years after each operation. I also had to use a crutch one time. I hid it behind me when the dogs gaited toward me. No problem! Now that the ("ADA") law has passed in the USA, similar circumstances should not be a problem with shows or with the AKC.

Response #5

I suffer from a chronic illness that causes me a great deal of pain and fatigue. It is a life time condition and unless a cure is found, is not likely to go away. I am relatively young and want to continue with my judging career because it is an important part of my life.

I must be careful to get enough rest and to not over exert myself. I save my energy to judge the dogs, as that is what is important to me. Sometimes, I am too tired to participate in social activities. Clubs may perceive this as rude but it is essential in order for me to keep the pain at a tolerable level and do a good job the next day. I need all my energy to focus on the dogs. Sometimes, my face and body language reflect my pain. People may mistake that as "unfriendly". I wish that I could reach out more to convince them that this not the case.

Response #6

I elected emeritus status several years ago due to my disability. I have a serious medical condition and am now on oxygen 24 hours a day.

I judged a dog show, where I had took my portable oxygen into the ring. I did not use it but put it under the table. This was a difficult day for me as I also was recovering from another serious injury. I had a horrible experience with an AKC representative that day. The AKC rep was going to write a letter to AKC telling them that I was incapable, if I would not retire. This representative is no longer with AKC, but this experience was so bad, that I made up my mind that day, I would judge the assignments I had on my books and then retire. And I did.

But a week ago I judged a match. I put my oxygen in a special backpack and just judged as I always did. No problems for anybody.

Somehow, I would like to convince people that I am not going to drop dead on the spot, just because I need supplemental oxygen. I hope the next person down the line makes out better than I did.

Conclusion

One contributor wrote that an all-breed club grumbled about having to be "at the beck and call" of a judge that had a disability. This contributor felt that the judge in question was not overly demanding and that the club could use a little "conscience-raising". This article was intended for exactly that purpose. Club officers, members, volunteers, judges and exhibitors are urged to keep an open mind when responding to the needs of those who have disabilities. None of us are invincible; disease and injury is not selective. Medical conditions can affect each person without warning. Responding to others equitably ... which may mean differently ... is the legally correct thing to do. It is also the best way to maintain the sense of dignity and value that is important to us all.

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© 2005 Dr. Gail H. Forsythe, Calgary, Alberta is a licensed CKC judge and member of the Law Societies of Alberta (1987) and British Columbia (1993). She has extensive law practice and academic experience assisting employers and organizations to address human rights issues. She has spoken at over 200 workplaces and conferences, and published in domestic and international legal journals on the topic of disabilities and human rights in the workplace. This article is for information and educational purposes only and not intended as legal advice. If you have a concern of this nature, consult a lawyer in your area for advice specific to your case.

People who are passionate about something—no matter how small or how large it is are the most successful and most happy.

—Simon Whitfield