

When tempers flare



ILLUSTRATION: STEPHEN MACGACHEN

Is your club prepared to handle a complaint at its next show?

by Gail H. Forsythe, LL.M.

It was an unusually crowded benching area. An exhibitor arrived late and found a small space next to another exhibitor who owned the same breed. They were intense rivals for Top Dog. Although reluctant to bench near a rival, the area was so crowded that the late arrival did so. The other exhibitor returned to the benching area and became very irate. A quarrel quickly developed over the space issue. Profanities were exchanged and overheard by a club official. The club official came over and helped the exhibitors adjust their equipment to accommodate both.

At ringside, tension was in the air. In the Specials class, one exhibitor waited until the judge was within ear shot, then said in a loud voice, "My, your dog is out of coat!" The other exhibitor retorted with a sharp "Shut up!" The exhibitor then said, "But it's true, look at the bare spots!" The judge said nothing, proceeded with the class, and awarded Best of Breed to the 'out-of-coat' dog. Both exhibitors then went to the BB spot, where they exchanged further angry words over who had won. The judge handed the BB rosette to the rightful owner, then sharply told both exhibitors to leave the ring.

Just before group judging, the owner of the BB winner was upset to see that large posters with photos of her dog were on display in her rival's set-up. Drawn on each photo were several large circles with a red 'X' in each. Next to each circle was a phrase quoted from the breed standard. It was apparent the poster was intended to illustrate that the BB dog lacked attributes required by the standard. The maligned owner approached the rival and demanded, "What the *&!* do you think you are doing?" The rival responded, "Don't take it personally. I have an obligation, as our

breed club's education officer, to educate people about the standard. It would benefit you to attend the seminar I'm doing for the judges today." Further profanities were exchanged and the owner of the BB dog stormed off for group judging.

After group judging, the exhibitor of the BB dog noticed that the rival was engaged in an animated discussion with the group judge, 'explaining' the breed standard to the judge. During the explanation, reference was made to the BB dog and its faults. This was the last straw!

The owner of the BB dog went to the show secretary's desk and asked for a complaint form. The show secretary demanded to know why the form was needed, but before the exhibitor could respond, turned her attention to other inquiries. The upset exhibitor became more agitated and asked a second time for the form. The show secretary made it clear that the exhibitor should not file a complaint because "It would upset people." Threatening to file a complaint against the club, the exhibitor insisted on the form, which the show secretary reluctantly provided. The complaint against the exhibitor was filed and the club members went into a panic – a bench-committee hearing was necessary. What should they do? This was going to be "ugly" and no one wanted to be involved! The rumours were flying among other exhibitors; almost everyone in the building was gossiping about the showdown that was about to begin.

Complaint control

Dog shows are emotional events for many people, particularly when rivalries are intense. Unfortunately, interaction of this nature is upsetting to other exhibitors, as well as damaging to the sport's reputation. Sadly, the above complaint is based on a compilation of events that actually occurred at dog shows. New fanciers and members of the public are easily turned off dog shows when they observe conflicts of this nature. What can, and should, your club do to prevent and resolve complaints? Here are a few tips:

1) Allow sufficient benching space for exhibitors and ensure that aisles and ring access areas are kept clear.

Overcrowded conditions are a serious danger to the public, the exhibitors and their dogs. If an emergency arose, medical personnel could be delayed in their efforts to reach an injured person. People could also be hurt if they needed to evacuate the building. Overcrowding contributes to feelings of tension and anxiety as people attempt to go about their business.

- 2) Appoint your club's hearing committee in advance of the show. Select people who have the capacity to remain calm, neutral and objective.** A hearing is neither an inquisition nor a criminal trial. It must be a fair process for both parties. Principles of natural justice require that each party understand the nature of the complaint and the applicable dog-show rule or bylaw. Each party is entitled to reasonable notice of the hearing; an opportunity to call witnesses (including judges who should remain on the premises until 15 minutes after the show concludes) and present relevant documents; adequate time to present their case; and the right to 'test' the veracity of statements through cross-examination. Witnesses should be excluded from the proceedings until their evidence is required. Cross-complaints should be heard separately to ensure the integrity of each proceeding.
- 3) Educate the committee about its role in advance of the show. Prepare your committee and club members by participating in a mock hearing.** Help all club members understand the committee's roles – to gather evidence, issue a written report and make a recommendation so that the discipline committee can render an appropriate sanction or dismiss the complaint for lack of merit. Many clubs fail to meet this obligation because they do not issue a report, or their 'report' lacks a recommendation and findings of fact. Generally, taking the middle ground and stating, "Both parties are at fault" is not helpful to the discipline committee. Your club's report can be greatly enhanced by following a set 'check list' of requirements.

4) Ensure proper facilities are available for the hearing. Hearings should be conducted in a quiet area.

To avoid escalation of rumours or complaints, members and participants should be encouraged to keep the proceedings confidential. Ensure that adequate equipment is available to record the proceedings – whether pen and paper or laptop.

- 5) Give people the complaint form and dog-show rules or bylaws when asked.** Remain neutral – do not discourage or encourage the filing of a complaint. The complainant must identify, as part of the complaint, which rule or bylaw relates to the complaint. Do not influence the drafting of the complaint. Exhibitors are expected to know the dog-show rules and CKC bylaws. It is the exhibitor's complaint; allow the exhibitor the time and dignity of framing it as the exhibitor thinks appropriate.

If your club follows these suggestions, you can take pride in knowing that your show is committed to the physical and emotional safety of all participants. Although complaints are not a daily occurrence at dog shows, they are important to the parties involved. Enhance your club's reputation by conducting fair hearings. Judges can assist greatly by not listening to, or engaging in, discussions with exhibitors about the merits of dogs. Walk away from exhibitors who attempt to intimidate with these lectures! Judges who take charge of their ring by not permitting an exhibitor to bully another, elicit respect.

Specialty or breed clubs can be proactive by intervening and, when appropriate, taking steps to discipline members who abuse their authority (e.g., in the name of education). Good luck and happy dog shows!

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