
THE FIRST SENIOR CONFORMATION JUDGE'S ASSOCIATION (SCJA) TRAINING MATCH

By B.J. Andrews



Sunday, June 12, 1988. Mark that date, for it signifies a new beginning in the annals of dog show history and the first SCJA Training Match.

What's new about matches? What's new about judges practicing their skills at matches? What IS the Senior Conformation Judge's Association (SCJA) and what is it doing for us? Read on!

The SCJA is becoming better known and more importantly, better understood by the average exhibitor. Not just a bunch of stuffed shirts and starched skirts sitting at leather-chaired meetings complimenting each other on their years of devotion and service. Let's be honest, the average exhibitor either didn't know much about the SCJA, or didn't see where it would help him or her personally. Most of us who enjoy the doggy press have read something about the SCJA but few understood what its goals were. So as one exhibitor to another, let me tell you that those who attended the first Training Match came away with a new understanding and a tremendous optimism about the future.

A unique concept? Yes and no. Old ideas cast aside by AKC but renewed and improved upon by the SCJA. Observer judges. "Hands on" learning. Continuing education FOR judges BY judges. Who better to teach the aspiring judges? Who better to share so much combined experience as breeders, former licensed handlers, and ultimately, acknowledged adjudicators of premium dog flesh?

The person who has stood in center ring for so many years has so much to

pass on to upcoming judges—and if we would but listen—to all the rest of us who make up the dog show world. What more constructive and effective way for these people to share their wealth of knowledge than by "organizing?" And so they did. Not to sit around and just pat each other on the back as some of us had supposed in the beginning, but to enrich a sport that means so much to them. Who are the beneficiaries? We all are!

Constricted by guidelines and policies, judges traditionally have distanced themselves from exhibitors on the day they're officiating. One had to wonder how judges were supposed to "talk" to exhibitors. Subject to criticism if they do and damned if they don't! Skulking off in secret visits to study dogs owned by people they dare not visit with during show hours. Trying to learn whilst not becoming indebted. Asking a fellow judge who might not know much more about a breed for an application reference rather than risk a visit to a top breeder's kennel. A difficult, contradictory situation for everyone. Well, the SCJA Training Match effectively ended that quandary!

Judges give up their deeply valued "free time" to attend clinics, seminars, and workshops. We all know that. But in Columbia, South Carolina, a new step was taken whereby learning takes place under actual show conditions (and in a terrific facility) with senior judges and top breeder-judges in each ring to inform and teach their observer judges. The pace was leisurely and conducive to in-depth study of each breed.

The SCJA and the South Carolina Federation of Dog Clubs turned a dream into a reality. Judges came at their own expense to participate in a unique and untested format. Think about that for a moment. Judges with heavy schedules who could have been judging or playing golf were not only willing but anxious to spend that precious weekend learning and sharing more about dogs! Contrary to established protocol, they were expected to openly mingle with exhibitors, to ask questions, and to encourage open communication.

This unlikely atmosphere was set at dinner the preceding night. Exhibitors were not only invited, but were encouraged to sit side by side with the judges who would be going over their dogs the next day. The motivating force and guest speaker was Lt. Col. Wallace Pede. Like many others, we gave up a free Saturday and out of curiosity, left early to attend the dinner. It was well worth it. Col. Pede said the talk he gave on inconsistencies in judging is not new. In fact, the script is probably older than the careers of many of those who sat there so intently entranced. Space doesn't permit coverage of the talk here but be assured, you won't want to miss it. Perhaps the strongest statement that could be made about his lecture is that even the next morning people were still saying "I didn't know THAT" or I hadn't thought about it that way."

Sunday morning. Exhibitors tiptoed into the show hall, still not sure just what to expect. Perhaps the night before had

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been a dream and the judges would have erected that inevitable judge-exhibitor barrier? But no, everyone quickly found themselves enjoying an incredible day of mutual SHARING! The relaxed and congenial atmosphere and the unaccustomed experience of being encouraged to chat with some of the biggest names in judging circles soon had everyone walking on cloud nine. Pretty heady stuff to be able to discuss some special point about type or character with a judge who was eager to hear you out. Dog fanciers putting aside the constraints of the show scene. I really doubt that any exhibitor had the bad taste to spoil the meaning and privilege of the day by trying to "promote" a particular dog and I'm sure this in itself allowed judges to initiate conversations with their exhibitors. How refreshing it must have been for them to be able to ask questions and encourage exchange of breed information without risking the proverbial spiel about "my new Special you've just got to see . . ."

The format was basically that of an all breed match. Puppies were judged, then adults. But wait, this isn't just another match. The QUALITY of exhibitors was exceptional. Obviously everyone had brought their very best youngsters. Let's face it, we all knew that while this afforded a unique training opportunity for the dogs in being examined by from two to ten judges, the primary purpose was for the judges to critique and discuss each exhibit's merits as compared to the breed standard. And then another new twist. "For Exhibition Only" dogs entered the ring. This class provided the Observers and Judge Trainees an opportunity to examine some of the top Specials in the country. Mature, proud and polished, these great dogs somehow seemed to know this was a very special "showring." They were there to represent their breed under the scrutiny of the cream of the crop in judges. Their faults would be duly noted, their virtues discussed. One exhibitor left the Saluki

Specialty in Kentucky and drove like mad all night to offer her magnificent dog, not for the chance at a "win," but to be objectively dissected for the benefit of future judges of her breed. A lot of good and dedicated dog people made it all happen, and happen with style and class!

Late afternoon and Groups began with another distinct difference. Observer judges in the Group ring. And yet another difference soon became apparent. How many of us have sat ringside while Groups were judged with only scattered or obviously organized applause for a few dogs? As an aside, I remember sitting at a Best In Show ring so filled with quality, not the least of which was the glorious GSD Hatter, and the invincible little Scottie, Shannon, that I was absolutely in awe. There was no applause. The almost empty ringside yawned and sat silent as seven great dogs moved individually. I won't editorialize other than to say it was a sad statement on the biased attitude and lack of respect so evident in today's exhibitor. But wait, did I hear applause for each and every exhibit in the Group rings at the SCJA Training Match? You bet we did! Not just dutiful applause, but genuine respect and support; a joyful expression of an attitude that I pray to God will carry over to the next licensed show we attend!

I won't try to tell you how many judges were there, I'd be sure to get it wrong. It's safe to say, well over thirty! Two hundred forty nine dogs in the regular classes. And indicative of the eager participation of the exhibitors, fifty five dogs were shown in "For Exhibition Only!"

Sunday evening and the day was running late due to the unexpected number of entries. Six o'clock and ringside was still heavily bordered by enthusiastic spectators who weren't going anywhere. Can you imagine that? Seven o'clock and they were still there to applaud Best In Match finals and Group "Exhibition Only" dogs. Anxious to savor every last

minute of a truly exceptional experience. The SCJA and the SC Federation of Dog Clubs did much more than make a dream a reality—they pulled off a miracle!

I had intended to submit this article anonymously, but in putting it together that began to seem downright hypocritical. Sure I'm pleased. You won't read anything negative here. And yep, one of our entries did us all proud. So what? This was one event where dog people met on common ground and dogs were judged under the toughest of criteria, each judge evaluating the other's opinions. It didn't matter if it was a nervous novice or an arthritic old breeder on the end of the lead. It didn't matter if you shared a Coke with a senior judge and then went into his or her ring. The only thing that mattered was a true sharing of opinion and knowledge. Whether your dog "won" or "lost" was not the issue, for every dog and every person there was a big winner—just by having been there. So I'll sign my name to this and the very fact I can do so without fear of lifted eyebrows is a testament to the atmosphere of that event and it's overwhelming impact on the Fancy.

There will be many more SCJA Training Matches. Watch for them in your area. Don't miss it. They represent one of the most constructive steps yet taken by a powerfully progressive organization on behalf of all dog Fanciers. June 12, 1988. It was a "test run" but indeed, it will have a tremendously positive impact on everyone involved in dog shows!•