

## For The Love of Our Veterans

by Gay Dunlap

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Interesting that I sit here, on Veteran's Day, contemplating where to begin this essay about veterans. It's about a veteran of a different sort, however ... our veteran dogs. For us, a veteran (from the Latin, *vetus*, meaning old), in dog show parlance is any dog or bitch that qualifies to be shown in the veteran class. The term is not used other than in this context. For example, despite her age, I do not refer to my eleven-year-old bitch, Mikaela, as a veteran. But this could change by the simple act of entering her in a veteran class.

Seldom is the qualifying age less than seven years, although with Great Danes it is six, and with some, eight. Many clubs break the veterans classes into two or more groups. The Great Dane Club offers two classes for veterans: 6 to 8, and 8 and over with entries ranging from 6 to 10 dogs in the younger division and half of that in the older one. For their veteran sweepstakes, Brittany exhibitors are provided with three divisions: 8 to 10, 10 to 12, and 12 and over.

A thread issued forth on the Judges List recently dealing with the veteran class, during which those speaking out seemed divided into sharply opposing factions on several issues. The discussion began with veteran class placements. Some, myself included, felt consideration should be given to awarding only first place, the rationale being that these old dogs are all special and therefore should not be subjected to a lowly placement or, worse, suffering the humiliation of being left out of the ribbons entirely. Others sallied forth with the idea that receiving any ribbon in the veteran class would be an honor. In my breed, and in most terrier breeds for that matter, the veteran classes are small. Consequently, the prospect of a dog or bitch being left out of the ribbons is pretty much a non-issue. At Montgomery this past October there were five veteran Smooth Fox Terriers but only first place was awarded, the remaining four receiving special rosettes. Airedale veterans were divided into three age groups: 7 & under 9, 9 & under 11 and 11 & over. The entries in each division were three or less.

This particular thread segued into another facet of veteran competition before it could be established that the polarization of this topic might have more to do with numbers than anything else. In other words, those receiving 2nd through 4th place in breeds with large veteran classes could well be proud.

Of considerably greater interest to the list was the subject of awarding Best of Breed to the winner of the veteran class. Spawned by a question inquiring as to what awarding BOB to an eleven-year-old veteran might say about its breed and its breeders, responses were varied. Some seemed rather emotional. It must be remembered that many of our judges are still breeding and exhibiting so that reactions may at times have reflected this. The question struck me personally as particularly relevant since an eleven-year-old veteran had won Best of Breed over sixteen specials at my breed's specialty in June. Although it was just a simple question and not meant as a comment, some tried to put that spin on it. Does pointing to an eleven-year-old veteran for Best of Breed infer that the quality of the specials was so poor as to offer the judge no other choice? When the veteran takes top honors does one conclude that

the breed is in bad shape? Or could it indicate the reverse...that the breed is in such great shape that its older dogs remain competitive? Both may be an oversimplification of the situation.

Certainly, if the award appears to have been emotionally driven, and let's face it, this is not unheard of, then questioning the judge's decision has merit. In many cases, however, the winning veteran has just reached the requisite age and differs little from his competition in the specials class. Historically, such has been the case in my breed with only one veteran winning at the more advanced age of nine, until, that is, the win of our eleven-year-old, mentioned previously. No matter the quality, one may still hear whisperings around the ring, "With all those specials, couldn't the judge find one he liked?" But does not the same hold true when the specialty judge awards BOB to a class dog or bitch? How about when the judge's choice is a puppy? Certainly any or all of these scenarios could speak to the lack of quality among the specials. But let's be honest here; a breathtaking puppy (or veteran dog) will always catch the discerning eye, whether it be that of the judge or of someone standing ringside. Good is good but better is better!

We should find it rewarding that a senior veteran is of such superb breed type that it can win Best of Breed, especially in a breed where dogs often finish as youngsters, some as puppies, and then disappear into the woodwork. We sometimes wonder what happened to them...did they fall apart? Did their coats go bad? Are they sick? Or was it simply that they weren't good enough to special? At my national specialty last fall, of the forty-four specials entered, most were in the one and two-year-old range and only three were over the age of four.

Hopefully, breeders across the board in all breeds are dedicated to preserving breed type and, beyond that, are continually striving to improve their stock. But should we not also be dedicated to longevity? And I don't mean keeping dogs alive that can hardly move around the room. I mean creating dogs that can remain in top condition through their golden years. The veteran class should generate pride, not simply the emotional knee jerk reaction of tears.

Veterans are generally treated with great respect in society. For the most part but not always, this holds true for our veteran dogs. The following struck a chord with me and thought it germane to the subject of respect: The Veteran Dog  
In the 24 hours since the following occurred, I can hardly believe the outpouring of comments and feelings that it has evoked. It all began 6 months ago and came to a head when I attended yesterday's meeting of our local breed club. This incident caused me much heartfelt pain that it made me wonder why I should "even bother."

I came close to not renewing my membership - and I am a founding member of this club. To be perfectly honest, the ONLY reason I renewed was because I am the Rescue Coordinator for the club. And I had not attended a meeting since "what happened" happened. I wasn't even going to attend the meeting until I noticed when checking the entries on-line that there was a certain lone entry listed... I knew then that I must attend and I must finally speak my mind...and my heart.

I sat down at my computer and carefully composed my thoughts. Tears came to my eyes as I wrote it and I feared that I could not read it aloud to the membership. And that was the case. As the President called out a request for "meeting adjourned," I stood up, said, "I have one more thing", and handed the copy to a good friend who was seated next to me. "I'm afraid I won't be able to read this to you all, but if Lynda would, I'd appreciate it".

As they say: "All names and breed have been changed to protect the innocent". I can't honestly say that anyone concerned in this incident is innocent, but the purpose of this is not to further embarrass anyone involved. This, BTW, did not occur at a Specialty, just at an All-Breed Show, in a non-regular class. The following is what I wrote: I see that the "Smiths" have entered their dog in the Veterans Class. Apparently there is no one in this Club who knows that it is customary to offer a round of applause for those that are entered.

Six months ago, at this same show, I entered my Veteran Dog in this same class. Not one person applauded. Not one person came up and said anything. Not one person came over to give him a kind word or a pat. Not one person made him feel he belonged again.

He was no threat to anyone. He wasn't going to beat anyone, take any points, or win anything. He was just an old dog who thought he was special again - back in the ring for the first time in many years. Maybe he even recalled his "Glory Days". He would have loved to have met anyone there. He would have welcomed you like an old friend. You didn't have to say anything nice about him if you didn't want to. But just in case you can't think of anything to say about a Veteran Dog, here are some suggestions: "It was nice to see him out there." Or go up to him and tell him he's a "Good Boy." Or tell his owner that you are glad that they brought him.

Those aren't exactly compliments, but they will please his owner and make him glad that they brought him. I don't think that's asking too much.

One day, all too soon, all your beautiful young dogs will be old dogs too. Maybe one day you'll enter them in a Veterans Class. And I hope that you do.

Or, like many of us, you remember that old friend, now gone, and wish you still had the chance. They deserve it. It may be their final time in the sun - their last time out in front of people. Their last time to ever be in the ring.

My old dog is a fool. He thought he was wonderful that day. He thought he belonged. Instead, he was ignored. I have thought about this for six months now, and wasn't going to say anything. But on his behalf, and that of any other Veteran, I hope that something like this never occurs again.

As a Club of (Breed) Fanciers, you should feel ashamed. Even if you dislike the dog or his owner, at least show good sportsmanship and do the right thing. Show others that you have respect for your breed. Make that Veteran Dog feel wanted and special again. Let him know that you are glad to see him. It will make his day. You may never get the chance again. Thank you. As Lynda began reading it, the hush that fell over the room was incredible. Bless her heart, my friend Lynda broke into tears as she struggled through reading this. EVERYONE in the room lowered their heads, and many of them began to cry also, including the President (who is a man).

I tried my best to hold my head up and refrain from tears, again. The President strode over to where I was sitting and in a broken voice said, "Terry...I am SO sorry. He is such a wonderful dog. There is no excuse for what happened to you. And to him."

As I started to say that I "wasn't going to say anything" again, the room nearly burst with everyone trying to talk at once. The discussion that followed was both eye-opening and of valuable purpose. Many came up to me in tears, with hugs and apologies. I am a very private and shy person, not given to sharing my deepest feelings easily. This had been an incredibly difficult thing for me to do, but in honor of my Veteran and all the others out there, I felt it must be done.

Was it worth it?

When "Mr. Smith" took his lovely 12 1/2 year old dog (neutered due to testicular cancer) into the ring, our entire membership remained - and applauded and "whooped and hollered" him with every move. The Judge moved to the center of the ring on his final go round and applauded, as did her ring stewards. Others nearby, watching other breeds, came over and remarked on how wonderful it was to see a Veteran being treated like that. Many, (including me) asked to take his picture. Everyone complimented him and his owners.

If only my old dog had enjoyed such a day...Was it worth it? You tell me...

*Sorry for the length of this, but so many in other breeds who heard about what happened have already asked me for a copy of my written paper that I thought perhaps it was something that needed to be shared. Amazing how quickly word spreads amongst us dog people. It's often said, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." But I know one old dog who taught something of great value.*  
~author unknown