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by Dr. Gerry G. Meiseis

In June 24, 2007 diesel fuel was \$2.82 a gallon. One year later to the day, it was \$4.89 a gallon. The increase in gasoline was also substantial but not quite as dramatic (from \$2.77 to \$3.99). If you show out of a diesel pusher motorhome that gets 7 miles per gallon, fuel cost for a show that is 250 miles away is now about \$350. Dry camping fees at two recent Florida shows were \$30 a day and in the Florida summer heat the generator runs 24 hours a day. Let's also not forget the typical entry fees for two dogs, and total costs for a two-day weekend can get up to \$500.00. It's not that different if you travel by car and stay in a hotel for two nights. What you save on fuel you spend on the hotel. The following table shows a comparison between costs for going to shows in a motorhome, driving and staying overnight, and commuting every day. Since no one would want to commute 7 or 8 hours a day, the last column is blank for a distance of 250 miles.

The conclusions from this table are compelling: if the shows are nearby, the length of the cluster makes little difference in cost no matter how one travels. If a show is further away, a multi-day cluster reduces the cost per show, especially for those showing out of a motorhome.

It isn't just fuel that is increasing in price, so are groceries and many of the commodities that we need in our daily lives. Politically motivated claims notwithstanding, it's pretty obvious that we are entering tough times economically and that almost everyone's discretionary resources will decline in the foreseeable future. Understanding or bemoaning the reasons is not useful because we can't change what is happening. It is a fact we must deal with: dog shows will have to compete for a shrinking pool of discretionary resources.

What this will do to dog shows has been a prevailing topic of discussion at every recent show and kennel club meeting, and on various listservs. Handlers, breeder-exhibitors, club officers, superintendents, judges, and AKC officials are all concerned. There are a few people who think the changing economic environment will have no significant effect because everyone in the sport is so closely vested in it, but there are many anecdotal stories that there will be some fairly profound short-term and long-term effects. For example, one professional handler says that even rather wealthy clients are reducing their commitments, have fewer dogs out, and promote their dogs less. Many exhibitors relate that they are curtailing their showing. Being Pollyanna-ish would be naïve. We are in a period of major change, and it is not going to be very pleasant for many of us.

Some handlers believe that individual exhibitors will just put their dogs with handlers because it is cheaper. One of them argued that "individual exhibitors will go away because they can only make it to nearby shows and why should they go there and lose when they can place their dog with a handler and win." This statement by a prominent and successful handler is telling not only for its lack of understanding of what motivates many of us, but also for its arrogance and its observation as a fact that conformation shows are not a level playing field for all. Some breeder-exhibitors may put their dogs with handlers in the short run. But in the long run this could have dire consequences for the sport because it could destroy its future. Two considerations support the contention that this will not be a common solution.

First, the individual exhibitor does not show just to get points or promote their dog, they do it because they love their dogs and the special relationship with them that showing develops. I had a wonderful experience a couple of weeks ago at the end of a Sunday show when

Distance, miles	Number of Show Days	Motor Home		Car with hotel		Daily Commute by Car	
		Total	Per day	total	Per day	total	Per day
250	2	\$509.29	\$254.64	\$399.75	\$199.88		
	3	\$589.29	\$196.43	\$549.75	\$183.25		
	4	\$669.29	\$167.32	\$699.75	\$174.94		
	5	\$749.29	\$149.86	\$849.75	\$169.95		
150	2	\$369.57	\$184.79	\$359.85	\$179.93	\$219.70	\$109.85
	3	\$449.57	\$149.86	\$509.85	\$169.95	\$329.55	\$109.85
	4	\$529.57	\$132.39	\$659.85	\$164.96	\$439.40	\$109.85
	5	\$609.57	\$121.91	\$809.85	\$161.97	\$549.25	\$109.85
50	2	\$229.86	\$114.93	\$319.95	\$159.98	\$139.90	\$69.95
	3	\$309.86	\$103.29	\$469.95	\$156.65	\$209.85	\$69.95
	4	\$389.86	\$97.46	\$619.95	\$154.99	\$279.80	\$69.95
	5	\$469.86	\$93.97	\$769.95	\$153.99	\$349.75	\$69.95

Assumptions: Motorhome 7 MPG and diesel fuel \$4.89/gallon; car 20 MPG, gasoline \$3.99/gallon; Camping fee \$30/day with electric hookups, motel \$100.00/night, entry fee \$25/dog, 2dogs/show

everyone was loading up. Back in the hall and away from the confusion sat a nice young woman with a very promising puppy she had bred. I accidentally glanced in that direction and saw her play with the puppy; the two were totally absorbed in each other, and she kept asking “who made you so cute” as they bounced a ball back and forth, alternating the play with cuddling and loving up the puppy. The puppy was equally absorbed. It struck me then that this is what it was all about: the human-dog interaction and the relationship between people committed to the same interest.

People like that don’t place their dogs with handlers because it’s cheaper. Those who argue that it’s cheaper to use a handler than to show dogs yourselves just don’t get it: for most amateur-owners, it’s not about finishing dogs as cheaply as possible; it’s about them, their dogs, fellow exhibitors and the relationship between them all.

The second point is that even those who want to finish their dogs as cheaply as possible must first have become involved in the sport and committed to it. Recent statistics provided by AKC show that most new exhibitors stay for only up to six shows and then disappear. They never get to the point of wanting to finish their dogs let alone to want to hire a handler. The superficial solution in the long run destroys the development of new generations of fanciers, and thus endangers the future of the sport. Besides, there is no savings unless the owners stay home and how can breeders and owners grow in their understanding of their own and other breeds and their dogs if they do?

Don’t get me wrong - handlers play an important role and have their place. For many enthusiasts, participating in the sport has become a way of life, but as they get older the work involved becomes too much for them. Besides, some people just can’t develop the skills and approach to present their dogs well, but they still love the beauty of their dogs and the involvement in the sport. That’s no reason for handlers to become arrogant. There are amateur handlers who handle as well as the best professionals.

The money to show our dogs ourselves, or with handlers, comes from our discretionary sources, and those are shrinking for almost everyone.

What is therefore likely to evolve is a system of a few large cluster shows and national specialties where there are majors, and a secondary system of smaller shows where dogs may earn single points and be trained for majors where it really counts. This is strikingly similar to the British System, with majors becoming similar to Challenge Certificates. The result will be a substantial reduction in the number of championships earned, and an increasing tendency for the sport to become more elite.

The impact of change will not be the same throughout the country. The effect should be least noticeable in the high population density areas such as the Eastern Seaboard. It will be greatest in sparsely populated areas such as in the western and northern Midwest.

Some outcomes are not that hard to predict. Majors are already harder and harder to find. We have a dog and a bitch that are singled out and have one major, but have not been able to find a major within 300 miles for four months! According to a few handlers I have talked to recently, there are more than a few dogs sitting in their kennels waiting for shows where there might be majors.

Entries are likely to decline overall because exhibitors will look more critically at a combination of factors. Shows will become more strongly differentiated into clusters with larger entries and smaller “neighborhood” shows that will draw less than 1000 dogs. The conformation sport itself will differentiate even more into the “haves” who will continue to chase the ratings, the serious fanciers who will show at local shows and save their money and vacation time for two or three major cluster shows and specialties a year, and the casual exhibitors who come to a few shows a year with the family. Serious fanciers will look for judges who are solid. Casual exhibitors are likely to fade away and become a declining component of the sport, one of several factors that will lead to a decline in entries overall. The loss of casual exhibitors will put at risk the attraction of new serious participants who usually begin casually until they are “bitten by the bug”.

Perhaps the best outcome could be an increase in the proportion of exhibitors who are discerning about the judges and show only to those who are courteous, knowledgeable, and objective. Many experienced exhibitors already have lists of judges under whom they will not show, judges they respect, and judges who are favorable to them no matter what they show. But there is also the rub: almost by definition, judges in that last category are political, but are sought out by those who win under them anyway, who thus support the objectionable practice they are glad to grumble about when someone else benefits. Meanwhile, the neophyte sees the transgression and wants no part of a sport that condones such practice.

It is perhaps unrealistic but there could be promise for the future if we, who fervently want this sport to survive and flourish, take

action. The action plan is “cleaning up the sport.” There should be zero tolerance for discourteous judges, rude exhibitors, and offensive handlers. There should be zero tolerance for judging that is not based on knowledge of dog quality and not conducted impartially. There should be zero tolerance for badmouthing fellow exhibitors, their dogs, or judges. Zero tolerance means that there should be no room for compromise or leniency.

We must do our best to make dog shows pleasant and enjoyable for everyone. We need to establish and use forceful mechanisms to eliminate from the sport those who will not follow these principles. This is a challenge to AKC and its member clubs that goes beyond judges approval. If we can all remember that with everything we say and do we are messengers and salespeople for dog shows and for purebred dogs, we will develop the environment at our shows that will dramatically improve the image of dog shows and help assure their future.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR - He and his family have owned, bred and shown (primarily in conformation) West Highland White Terriers since 1959, have finished over 50 home-bred Westies and a number of dogs in other breeds, notably Norwich Terriers and Lhasa Apso. He is a judge licensed for all Terriers, Delegate to the AKC for the St. Petersburg Dog Fanciers Association, President of the Lakeland-Winter Haven KC, and chair of the West Highland White Terrier Club of America's Judges' Education Committee. The Meisels' live in the Tampa, Florida area.