

**Beauty Pageant of the Dog World**  
Jillian Burstein

Millie, the young Springer, is sitting beside me, head in my lap as I type, practicing the “spaniel gaze.” At sixteen months she’s already got it down. The spaniel heart is warm. The soft spaniel eye brims with love. If ever the world’s diplomats and arms negotiators learn the spaniel gaze there will be peace on earth.

—Larry Shook, *The Puppy Report*

The cheers of the crowd grow in size and volume as she is escorted from the crazed atmosphere of backstage to the center of the large stadium, leaving behind the hysteria of screaming coaches, rushed preparation, and clinking supplies. As the blue curtain closes behind her, time seems to stand still while she makes her way to center stage. Eyes batting in the bright lights, her hair shines as her head turns from side to side, taking in the audience. Hearing her name yelled one thousand times throughout the stadium sends her heart racing. Sensing the excitement of the crowd, her tail wags back and forth as she hears her name echoed throughout the crowded arena. Mary Belle, the golden Springer spaniel, has just won Best in Show.

To outsiders, this “sport” may seem surprising, to say the least, but, to many extreme dog lovers, dog showing has become not only a hobby but an art form. Throughout the years, the length to which owners have gone to show their dogs has escalated to varying levels of extreme, placing the owner’s desire of winning high above the well being of the dog.

Whether it be playing fetch on the weekends or engaging in social activity with a dog lovers group, dog lovers' treatment of their dogs can be puzzling to outsiders. Leslie Padgett, editor of *The New York Dog* magazine, put it best: dog lovers treat their dogs like children (Sheehy). In a survey conducted by V.L. Voith from the Veterinary Clinics of North America, ninety percent of dog owners considered their dog a family member (Keller 94). These dog lovers "do not perceive their dogs as dogs; they are family members, best friends and 'fur babies'. These dog lovers also do not perceive themselves as dog owners; they are parents" (Greenebaum 119). Jessica Greenebaum, author of "It's a Dog's Life," has spent time with a group of dog lovers who attend "Yappy Hour" at Fido's Barkery. "Yappy Hour," a sort of canine happy hour, is an opportunity for dogs to "run back and forth from the front to the back of the store. The front of the store is where the dogs play and get attention from people. The back of the store is where the dogs get cake and the humans get wine or soda from Frank, the owner and 'bartender'" (Greenebaum 118). Greenebaum believes that "Yappy Hour" gives owners the opportunity to distinguish themselves from the "typical dog owner and reinforce their standing as 'parents'" (119). Stressing anthropomorphism, seeing the dog as a child rather than an animal, Greenebaum has seen that "the dogs are so integrated into the family that they take on the role of 'fur babies'" (123). One couple has even included their dogs into their will, explaining that:

If something happens to us they will be provided for. It's not like we'll put them up in a penthouse, but I certainly would hate for something to happen to [my husband or me] and then they'd have to go to a shelter. So we have talked to certain people about taking them in. And I would not want someone to not take

them in because of a financial burden. So we have allowed a certain amount to be given to their care... That's why they're fur babies. That's how we think about them (Greenebaum 123).

Providing for the dog, a term used rather loosely, has conjured up a variety of meanings. Having spent over thirty-four billion dollars in 2004 on their pets alone, dog lovers will not fall short of this figure in the years to come ("Industry Statistics"). This number includes "an estimated \$100 billion spent on supplies and pet services" (Sheehy). There is "an abundance of dogs being preened, toted, and cared for...almost to the point of obsession" (Sheehy).

Dog owners have gone to various extremes to make sure that their dog is cared for, including "spending thousands of dollars providing for expensive medical care such as chemotherapy and radiation for the mixed breed suffering from cancer, acupuncture for the Airedale suffering from chronic pain, and multiple visits to an ophthalmologist to treat a Pug's eye infection" (Greenebaum 128). Richard, an avid dog lover, claimed that he "would 'borrow or steal or do whatever [he] could' to provide" for his dogs (Greenbaum 128). An article in The Economist tracked a number of extreme owners who feel that walking, feeding, and sheltering a dog is not enough, spending up to \$250,000 per year on one animal (Underwood 52). Luxury dog items such as "Japanese ergonomically designed shears sell for \$2,000. 'Pooch de Noel' fragrance goes for \$500 a bottle, Italian leather collars and leashes for as much as \$5,000" ("Best in Show" 31). All this and more can be found at Les Poochs; this dog boutique markets itself as "the Louis Vuitton of the dog world" and sells a complete line of luxury toys, clothes, and grooming supplies that cost more than some people make in a year ("Best in Show" 31).

Vendors take advantage of the dog market, selling rare products you won't find at your local grocery store. Dog food that promises to "reduce cell damage and improve skin and coats" ("Best in Show" 31), doggie treadmills that help to keep dogs in shape even during the cold winter months (Litsky B11), and a newer invention, "Doggles"—dog sunglasses with UV protection—have hit the market, sending dogs and their owners running to purchase. Other commerce includes dog self-help books, dog jewelry, dog-food cookbooks, bumper stickers, artwork, and hand knit sweaters made out of the dog's shed fur (Goldberg 28, Stern 18).

The owners' dedication to their dogs can be seen not only through the products purchased for the dog, but also in their efforts to showcase the visual beauty of the animal. Doorknockers in the shape of dogs, embroidered dog pillows, as well as commissioned portraits of dogs are only a few different ways that dog owners display their passion and appreciation for the canine species (Brick 1). William Wegman and Thierry Poncelet have made a living from their eighteenth-century portraits that "feature dogs dressed in human clothes, embodying human foibles and illustrating the classics of 'human' childhood," such as Cinderella and Little Red Riding Hood (Garber 23).

Extreme dog lovers will stop at nothing to make sure that their dog has the best to become the best of the best. Irish publishers Michael O'Doherty and John Ryan have been following the dog lover's market and earlier last year decided to take part in some of the action. *The New York Dog*, the "furry Vogue" of the magazine industry, launched its first issue on September 21, 2004 (McCarthy). The magazine features "high-end dog fashion with stylish photos"; imagine "Prada-clad Pomeranians and Greyhounds lounging in Gucci" (McCarthy). In addition to fashion, *The New York Dog* also includes "the ten

best walks in Manhattan,' how to keep a dog in a custody battle... dog horoscopes and obituaries, dog dieting tips and pop psychology advice for dogs (Lavery). September's "Doggyscope" for Virgo read:

February and November are your best months and Wednesday is your lucky day!  
 Virgo is symbolized by the Virgin who represents purity, modesty,  
 industriousness, and service to humankind. This makes Virgo dogs good  
 Samaritans, good guide dogs, and welcomed and admired wherever they go  
 (McCarthy).

Editor Leslie Padgett believes that "dog lovers need a resource that combines these things and spotlights the hilarity we so often experience when living with our dogs" (Sheehy).

The divide between a dog lover and a dog fanatic can be clearly seen in Christopher Guest's "mocumentary" *Best in Show*. The movie is "very accurate," according to dog lover and Rhodesian ridgeback owner Larry Spruill. This parody of the Westminster Dog Show walks the audience through the preparation and actual showing of a dog. Guest's intended parody of a dog show clearly shows the distinction between fan and fanatic. Announcer Buck Laughlin, played by Fred Willard, says, "I notice in these competitions they don't do the basic sit up, roll over, fetch, heel...they start at a higher level than that." These dog lovers will stop at nothing until they win.

When dog shows originated in England around 1859, about sixty entries competed in only two categories: pointers and setters (Garber 187). Today, almost 2,500 dogs from 162 breeds compete in New York's Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, which "has become a television favorite with people who love dogs, beauty contests, stars, and crowds" (Hewitt and Garber 188). Westminster remains the second oldest

sporting event next to the Kentucky Derby, which is only one year older, awarding the “holy grail of breeders” the “Best in Show” grand prize (Hewitt).

As the show announcer describes the history and purpose for breeding, the handler escorts the dog into the ring. The handler will then proceed to walk the dog back and forth twice for the judge to see the front and back of the dog as well as the dog’s movement. The dogs are trained to stop on cue to display their best attributes for the judge to see (“It’s a Dog’s Life 96”).

The importance of breeding the perfect dog is elementary in an environment like this. Extreme care is taken in choosing mates that will produce the most prototypical offspring. In extreme cases, the male’s “sperm may well have been flown cross-country on ice, courtesy of the International Canine Semen Bank – ‘First in Frozen Assets’” (Underwood 52). The prototypical ideal of a blue ribbon-winning dog is not only considered desirable; owners dedicate good portions of their lifetime to achieve perfection. Viewed as an art form, “breeding is more than a science, more than just Lady Luck smiling on the chosen, more than just having an eye for a good dog... [P]urebred dogs are living, loving works of art, and the pursuit of breeding is an artistic...venture” (Weitz 59). The combination of “producing a near-perfect specimen” (Weitz 59) along with hiring a professional handler is what makes “a great dog spectacular” (Underwood 52).

In striving to exhibit the perfect qualities of the specific breed, the American Kennel Club...judge[s] appearance, not behavior. Each dog is judged against the standard of its own breed. Is the resemblance of Dachshund A to the Platonic ideal of Dachshunds greater than that of Rottweiler B to the über-Rottweiler? In

other words, the “best” Labrador retriever at Westminster may not even know how to swim, let alone retrieve, but his ears will be the right distance from his nose (Goldberg 28-29).

In order to showcase their “perfect specimen,” many owners will often hire professional dog handlers. While moving to complement the dog’s movements, the handler may use toys that squeak, make noises, or award the dog with food while in competition (“It’s a Dog’s Life” 9C). Many of the handlers “are easy to recognize because they tend to pull the bits of dried liver used to excite the dogs from their own mouths rather than from their pockets” (Brick 1). Professional handler Doug Belter, who is “responsible for transporting, exercising, grooming, and ‘showing’ the dogs” describes Westminster as “two days of hell,” referring to the “grueling week of twenty-hour days, catering [to the dog’s] every whim” (Hewitt). Robert Boswell, Rhodesian ridgeback owner and trainer, believes that the person handling the dog determines 50 percent of the outcome of the dog’s performance.

In hiring a professional handler, many owners get extremely caught up with simply winning the title of Best in Show. Bobbi Compton, Vice President of the North Eastern Maryland Kennel Club and owner of four Boxers feels that

Everybody is pleased by winning. People will go to any length to win. It becomes a tremendous ego trip and the dog becomes secondary to the people. There are top winning dogs that fly across the country every weekend. They don’t have a home life... their owner may not be able to pick them out of a crowd. But their owner is winning. That’s what causes the bad things in dogs. A dog show is just another microcosm of the world: just another subculture.

Creating a winning dog takes hours to achieve. Kathleen Morimoto, a Rhodesian ridgeback owner from Virginia, reports that dog owners will arrive at a show at four o'clock in the morning to prepare their dog for a noontime showing. Some dogs have their hair rolled in imported rice paper to "protect [the] tresses from workday damage" (Underwood 52). The dogs are treated like "Barbie dolls," having the handlers apply "mascara and eyeliner; a few are said to attach hairpieces, which are not allowed. "A past winner...was rumored to have had a face-lift (later proved to be untrue)" ("Best in Show" 31). After attending the Westminster Dog Show in 2000, Jonah Goldberg, author of "Fufus and Fidos and the Westminster Dog Show," observed "one bearded collie being assaulted by a hairdryer... His bangs bundled into a rhino horn of fur; he looks up at me with an expression of intense humiliation. A caged German shepherd is in even worse straits: 'Please,' his eyes plead, 'kill me now'" (28). Albert Payson Terhune wrote in his 1919 book *Lad: A Dog*:

In some kennels Airedales were "plucked"... In other kennels bull terriers' white coats were still further whitened by the harsh rubbing of pipe clay into the tender skin. Sensitive tails and still more sensitive ears were sandpapered, for the victims' greater beauty—an agony... Ears were "scrunched" until their wearers quivered with stark anguish—to impart the perfect tulip shape, ordained by fashion for collies" (Garber 183).

While this behavior may seem impossible today, owners will still go to great extremes in order to create the most prototypical dog they can. Bobbi Compton verified this behavior to me in an intriguing interview. Referring to grooming, Compton said that the Poodle is the hardest dog to groom because it "takes hours. It is hair-sprayed and

teased and each strand is sprayed into place. It just takes them hours and hours. You can't touch them, or else you would ruin the look. And after the show is over you have to wash all the crap out." In reference to the truth behind "touching up" the dogs before or during a show, Compton answered,

Yes, absolutely. But it's illegal. There is a fine line. You can put black magic marker on the dog's nose to make it black. 'Marks-a-lot' is the magic marker of choice around the show room, because it doesn't smell. The other brands of markers make the dogs sneeze all over the place. The problem is if the judge touches the nose and black comes off on their hands. Some people have their dogs' noses tattooed.

Many find this type of judging completely subjective, which creates a sense of politics only the "greats" know how to work around. Bigger shows, such as Westminster, "are sometimes rife with rumors of doping, judge fixing, and even canine sabotage" (Hewitt). Handler Valerie Atkinson from California explains politics and pressures: "quality handlers know it's a job and you have to leave your feelings in the ring. But there are some who can take it personally. At this show, anything can happen because of all the hype and the politics involved" (Hewitt).

Described as "loyal, powerful, good-natured, brave, selfless, fearless, intelligent, rugged, and dignified," show dogs are labeled with superhuman characteristics most humans strive for (Sandomir). For the extremist dog lover, playing fetch in the backyard is no longer an acceptable form of recreation. Dogs are pampered and given high quality, expensive treatment usually reserved for society's elite. Show dog owners appear to love their dogs unconditionally, including them as members of the family, yet constantly

striving for their moment of glory: winning the title of Best in Show. The dog remains secondary in this sport originally designed to put the dog first.

At the end of the day, when all of the fans return home, the makeup is taken off, and supplies are put away, Mary Belle, the golden Springer spaniel is left unwittingly to chase a squirrel in the back yard. Meanwhile, her owner acquisitively polishes her newly won trophy.

## Appendix A

### Interview with Bobbi Compton

Full Name Bobbi Compton

VP of NE Maryland

Club Associated With Associated northeastern Maryland kennel club, Maryland and American boxer club

Type of Dog boxer (4)

Dog's name oldest: liesl, oldest girl in *The Sound of Music* –schoental's fraulein liesl, C.D. CGC., TDI

“Dogs get an official AKC registered name, and they get a call name.”

Can you describe your interpretation of what happens at a dog show?

“There are various parts to a dog show.. The judging for conformation Refers to basically the beauty of the dog and how closely they come to the written standard for each breed. The dog is judged against that standard. Each judge interprets the constitution differently. There are also other parts of the dog show, the obedience competitions. C.D. is obedience. The dog has certain tasks to do, and he has to do them. The agility is a real fun thing. The dog has to jump over something, run through a tunnel, climb a sea-saw. Are much more than just beauty contests “

Have you seen “Best in Show”? What was your reaction to it? I don't think you can enjoy it if not familiar with dog shows. Takes all characters at dog show and makes them super human. Lots and lots of gay people probably because it gives them the chance to nurture. Favorite scene: The announcer because he just captured the

Are there any grooming techniques you use while showing your dog? (makeup, etc)

Well a boxer is what I would refer to as a wash and wear dog. There is really not a whole lot of grooming. Basically they get their whiskers shaved, and their toe nails clipped.

Basically, it is a 15 minute job. I would imagine a poodle would be the ultimate grooming job. That takes hours. It is hair-sprayed and teased and each strand is sprayed into place. It just takes them hours and hours. You cant touch them, or else you would ruine the look. And after the show is over you have to wash all the crap out.

Is there truth to makeup?

Yes, absolutely. But its illegal. There is a fine line. You can put black magic marker “marks a lot” the magic marker of choice around the show room because it doesn’t smell. The black is put on their noses. The problem is if the judge touches the nose and black comes off on their hands. some people have their dog’s noses tattooed. Dogs wear braces they actually have a canine orthodontist.

How do the dogs respond to this? Dogs are pretty much like kids they can get used to anything. A dog bite is very important to the standard it tells you exactly what the dog should look like. It is illegal because you are hurting the breeds.

What do you mean by egos: every body is pleased by winning. People will go to any length to win. It becomes a tremendous ego trip and the dog becomes secondary to the people. There are top winning dogs that fly across the country every weekend. They don’t have a home life... their owner may not be able to pick them out of a crowd. But their owner is winning. That’s what causes the bad things in dogs. A dog show is just another microcosm of the world, just another subculture

What got you started in dog showing? I’ve had dogs since I was a very young child. I finally got a well bred dog, and after that it was an ego thing. You think you have a beautiful puppy.

I have had ten litters in 20 years.

“Dogs and little children are ice breakers.”

How would you describe your relationship with your dog in your family setting?  
My children are grown. No, I don’t treat my dogs like children, but my kids would probably disagree with you.

Do you have children? 2 How many? What ages? 29 girl 32  
What type of social activities do you do with your dog? All my dogs are therapy dogs. All are members and have been certified by therapy dogs international. – trains in obedience, and hospice and nursing home. “the old people just absolutely love the dogs” Its really a privilege that I can do something good for the community and I am doing something that I like to do as well. An all around win-win situation.

What is the best part of showing your dog?  
I like getting obedience titles because that’s something that I do myself. I do the training and take them in the ring. It develops a tremendous bond between my dog. And wants to

do it to please me. But there is nothing like winning in a big show, but it doesn't happen very often so that makes it even better.

Buying a well bred puppy is like adopting a baby

What is the worst part?

The nastiness that accompanies any thing that people are competing. For any dog show, there are only 3 winners on a given day. Only 3 people are going to be happy on that day. Everybody else is going to have lost. And people aren't happy when they lose.

Worst thing someone has done:

General nastiness. People say horrible things to you or your dog.

Do you breed your dog?

How far have you traveled to show your dog?

Wisconsin. The Abbey at lake Geneva. My dogs traveled to Seattle. Boxers have handlers. It would seem that the bigger the dog or the more grooming that's involved would mean that they have a professional handler.

What is your take on the politics of dog shows?

What type of rewards are there for winning a dog show? (What is the incentive for you?)

Nothing, unless it's a specialty dog show, then you would win a ribbon, and maybe a mug with a boxer on it. There is no money and most and even if you do win something there is little monetary value to the prize. Its for the winning. Sometime professional handlers don't even bother to go get the awards.

How much do handlers cost?

Charges \$65 just to take dog in ring. Extra charge for expenses. Entering costs at least 25. every show is 100.

To finish a boxer costs 5000 (getting their championship). Breeds you can handle yourself on the surface cost less, but if you really analyze it, you have to go to every dog show

How long to finish? Can take as little as 3 shows. Its more likely that it might take 6 months to a year. All together I have 6 that are champions and 6 obedience champions

How do you perceive dog lovers in general? I relate to dog lovers because I have always been a dog lover. They are just my type of people. People either like animals or they dislike animals. I guess I just prefer people who like animals. People who like animals are a bit more nurturing and compassionate.. its just what turns you

What is your reaction to some of the stereotypes out there regarding dog lovers?

They are true. But most stereotypes are true. When I went to my first dog shows, I met a lady that I know and she said that her mother said that her mother said that everyone at dog shows is fat or gay. And it's true. If you go to a dog show and look around at the women, they are really fat. All of the stereotypes of *Best In Show* are true.

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