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What is the Westminster Dog Show all about?

Dear Gus,

I recently watched the Westminster Dog Show on television, and I didn't understand the concept of how the dogs were judged. The dogs within a single group (for example, terrier group) were so diverse, and didn't seem to be very well trained. How can a comparison be made between a Miniature Schnauzer at 12 inches tall and an Airedale at 24 inches tall?

D. Lancaster, Orange

There are two main types of American Kennel Club (AKC) shows: Conformation events and obedience trials. Westminster is a conformation show, which evaluates each dog against the predetermined standards for each type of purebred dog—in other words, how well does the dog conform to the standards for the breed. The goal of these events is to preserve these standards and to maintain the ideal for breeding stock. Think of conformation shows as beauty pageants.

Each dog is judged first within its breed (Miniature Schnauzer or Airedales as you said). The dog judged as Best in Breed then competes for Best in Class. The breeds are assigned to one of seven classes: Sporting, hounds, herding, toy, working, terrier, and non-sporting. The final competition in a conformation event is Best in Show, which judges across the classes. Although the judges do evaluate the dogs against some performance standards such as their gait, it is mainly based on appearance. Some of these dogs may have Obedience titles; however, the dogs are measured against the standards for that breed rather than their performance or obedience in the ring.

Obedience trials are more of a level playing field. This is where a dog is competing for a personal score and competing against other dogs in its specific group for titles. As in a conformation event, AKC judges award points. According to the AKC, obedience competition demonstrates the usefulness of a dog as a companion to humankind. Dog and handler teams are judged on how closely they match the judge's mental picture of a theoretically perfect performance as they execute a series of specified exercises...

I hope this answers your question! You can learn more about the different types of AKC events by visiting the AKC Website, which is www.AKC.org

The Opinions in this column do not necessarily represent those of this publication. Gus Marnel of Milford is the owner of K-9 Communications and is a registered professional dog trainer.

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