

CONFORMATION & THE BREED RING

The words alone are enough to strike fear in the heart of many a newcomer (and old timer alike if truth be told!)

Why are we here?

The Conformation ring (aka “In Breed”) is where each dog is examined and evaluated to determine how closely it meets the official standard for The Bernese Mountain Dog.

*** What...Did I hear someone say, “what’s a standard, and...what makes it official?”

The Standard is...

The official standard for the BMD in the USA is written by the Bernese Mountain Dog Club of America (BMDCA) and accepted by the AKC. The Standard is a document which describes the ideal Bernese Mountain Dog. In general, it sets forth the characteristics which are the essence of the breed; what sets the BMD apart from other large dogs and what allows the Bernese to perform the particular functions it was bred for originally. Specifically, the Standard defines the structure, movement, temperament, coat, and yes...markings, which together comprise the ideal BMD. The goal of responsible breeders is to select for breeding those dogs which are most likely to move the breed ever closer to that ideal. The Standard is modified only on rare occasions (and usually with much debate) in order to ensure a steady path without detours to accommodate the whims of fashion.

What are they looking at? ...Seeing beyond the markings

Judges ‘go over’ (examine) each dog with their hands to see if the teeth, muscles, bones, and coat texture match the standard. They also watch the dog being “gaited” (trotted) to evaluate movement from the front, back and side perspectives. Movement can be a good indicator of structure, temperament, and condition ~ all of which are described in the Standard.

Next time you’re ringside, you be the judge. Keeping in mind that the central theme of the standard is all things in moderation, take a few minutes to really watch the dogs go ‘round. Look for an overall picture of balance. Does any one aspect of the dog overwhelm the rest? From a side view, do the front & back ends of the dog look like they go together. Consider the gait: does the dog move (trot) with an easy, efficient, and ground-covering stride or does it seem to paddle, crab, or prance? Is the topline (back) level and steady while the dog is in motion or is it bobbing up and down? Does the dog’s head have a broad, flat top... and cheeks leading into a strong muzzle? The temperament of the Bernese is expressed physically in his dark, slightly oval shaped eyes...in the ears brought up level with the top of his head when alert... and in a tail carried proudly out behind in confidence (but not in curl).

Tip: Take a cue from the original Standard written in 1937, and look for the dogs that radiate “a combination of sagacity, fidelity, and utility” ~ you won’t be far off the mark.

How does a show work?

Because the National Specialty is such a large event with dogs and people from coming from the four corners, it can easily be likened to “The Superbowl”. The competition is tougher than usually found at local shows and every dog in the ring is being judged by hundreds of pairs of eyes. Nonetheless, like any other dog show, the Specialty is basically a single-elimination tournament working towards the



selection of one dog being named as Best in Show. In the case of an independent specialty like ours where only one breed is being judged, Best of Breed and Best in Show are one and the same thing so you'll hear the terms used interchangeably.

Where do we start?

In the same place as our dogs, *the classes*. It might help to think of the classes as being comparable to divisional play in school sports. In the dog show world, dogs are grouped first by gender and then by age or other common element.

The *regular* classes are:

Puppy (Three classes, based on age: 6-9, 9-12, and 12-18 months).

Novice (For dogs who are in the early stages of their show career)

Bred by Exhibitor (The dog is shown by the individual who bred it, a point of pride~ especially at a specialty)

American Bred (The dog's parents mated in the USA and the dog was born in the USA.)

Open (A general class for all dogs eligible for breed competition)

What happens in the classes?

All of the 6-9 month old Puppy dogs (males) compete against each other for 1st, 2nd, 3rd, & 4th placement in their class. Then the 9-12 month Puppy dogs, 12-18 Puppy dogs, Novice dogs, and so on. When all of the dog classes have been judged, the winners of each class return to the ring~ they have made it through the first elimination round. From this group of class winners, the judge will select her *Winners Dog*. The process starts over again, this time for the bitches (girls), and ends with the selection of *Winners Bitch*.

To be chosen Winners Dog or Winners Bitch is a large accomplishment! These are the only two class dogs who will advance to the Best of Breed competition and...they will 'take home the points' (towards their championship). A Reserve (runner-up) to each is also chosen. In the unusual event that there was an error in a Winners entry, the Reserve would move up and be awarded the championship points.

Speaking of which....where have all those Champions been during all this?

Getting ready for Best of Breed competition, relaxing, or schmoozing most likely. While "unfinished" dogs and bitches (those who haven't yet accumulated the points necessary for a Championship title) have to battle it out in the classes to determine which one of each sex will go on to the BB competition, Champions of record get 'a buy' and are automatically eligible to compete for BB.

All roads lead to Best of Breed

Strutting into the ring are the Champions of record, the Winners Dog and Winners Bitch, and the Best Veterans. The judge will 'go over' and 'gait' each of the dogs in the same way she did the class dogs.

At a National Specialty there are many dogs entered for BB competition, after all... this is the Crown Jewel of conformation showing. Most often, the judge will request that one sex or the other be presented first and in catalogue order (in order by their entry number, shown on the armband of the handler). Note that in BB judging (unlike the classes) the dogs and bitches are competing with each other, however, most judges find it more practical to separate them initially. The judge will then allow 10 or so dogs at a time to enter the ring for judging. She will evaluate each, make notes, and perhaps...point to a few in the lineup before they are excused from the ring.

The selected dogs have made the first cut and will come back into the ring later along with those selected from each of the succeeding groups. The exact system used is at the discretion of the judge so will vary from one specialty to the next. Some will bring the first cut dogs back and cut again...still within the same gender, others will wait until they have evaluated both the dogs and bitches to bring the 1st cut dogs back. At this level of competition, making each successive cut is an accomplishment so there truly are many winners.

The judge will continue to evaluate dogs and pare down the field of contenders by making successive cuts~ usually until there are about 12-24 (dogs and bitches combined) left. She will then point to her BB, BOW, and BOS, followed by her Award of Merit recipients~all to a resounding cheer from the crowd of excited (and exhausted) spectators.

Best of Breed (BB)- The one dog or bitch out of all that have been evaluated, which the judge determines to be the closest approximation of the ideal BMD described in the Standard.

Best of Winners (BOW)- Which of the Winners (Winners Dog or Winners Bitch) the judge determines to be the closest approximation of the ideal BMD described in the Standard.

Best of Opposite Sex (BOS)- The entry of the sex opposite that of the BB which the judge determines to be the closest approximation of the ideal BMD described in the Standard. For example: If the BB is a bitch, then the BOS would be the dog (male) considered by the judge to be the best male exhibited.

Award of Merit (AOM)- Awarded at the discretion of the judge to those dogs she finds worthy, quite an honor.

Other Classes (oh no! not again?)

No, not in the same respect as the 'regular' classes discussed earlier. At a specialty there are usually a number of additional classes of particular interest to breeders. Classes such as Stud Dog and Brood Bitch are designed to evaluate the animal's performance as sire or dam by judging its offspring. In Brace and other multiples classes, the judge is looking for consistency in structure and movement. These 'non-regular' classes do not offer the prospect of points towards championship.

Back to the future...

Two Shows before THE Show; Sweepstakes and Futurity

Both the Sweepstakes and Futurity classes are stakes classes, that is to say that the entry fees are divided between the winners. The BMDCA offers Sweepstakes for Veterans, Futurity is for puppies only. These are not official events in the sense that championship points are not up for grabs, they are more an opportunity for breeders to see the ancestors and the 'get' (offspring) of the dogs currently in their prime breeding years.

Veterans Sweeps (The Cheer and Tear classes)

One of the things that make a Specialty so special is the opportunity to see the Veterans. The classes are divided by age; 7-9 years, 9-11 years, and over 11 years. Each of these dogs receives a hearty cheer in celebration of their seniority and the fact that they are out there and doing it!

Futurity-When you understand this one, you're not a newcomer anymore.

Futurity is an event designed primarily by and for breeders. BMDCA member breeders select the judge, put up the stakes money, and determine which puppies will be entered.

In Futurity, puppies are judged in classes similar to those in the regular Breed ring, the difference being how they come to be there. Futurity is like a poker game ... you ante to get in and then raise or fold as the cards are turned over.

In Futurity, the focus is on the breeder's confidence in the breeding decision he/she has made. The breeder must nominate their litter before it's been whelped (born). Along with the nomination goes a check, no refunds~ this is the "ante". At this point, the breeder is essentially putting their money up ... banking that the careful selection they made when choosing the sire and dam of the litter will result in puppies that are excellent examples of Bernese Mountain Dogs.

Since not all puppies from any litter turn out to be show prospects, individuals pups must then be nominated again (with an accompanying check) before they turn 4 months of age. Again, the breeder is betting on how the pup will develop between 4 months of age and the date of the specialty. At the Specialty, all bets are called and cards put on the table when the pups enter the ring for judging. The stakes are split amongst the winners with the breeder entitled to a share regardless of who owns the puppy at that point.

