

The Ethics of Conformation

Robyn Sally

When discussing which dogs should be bred, the one “baseline” requirement seems to be a “CH” before their name or “COT” afterward. Whether that is correct is an entirely different topic, but this is our current breeding culture. It follows that our approach to conformation competitions becomes increasingly important. The ethics of showing in conformation are complex. While I will never claim to be the best person to provide clarity, I want to highlight the critical grey areas that are present and always up for debate.

Is it my responsibility to self-eliminate my dog from the breed ring if I know they have a disqualification (DQ), or is it the judge’s responsibility to remove them?

This is the first question I want to address because it’s the one that puts my own credentials into the spotlight. I do not show in conformation. I own a dog that is hovering around an inch out of standard. I choose not to bring him into the conformation ring even though I have been encouraged to and told, “no one will wicket him.” I had to choose years ago between a path of transparency or finishing him so he gets that shiny gold star of approval. My choice was obvious.

We are paying judges for their expert opinions. We’re paying them to look at every dog in the ring and compare them

to the standard
we have all agreed is the definition of a Beauceron. Why
should it be our
responsibility, then, to self-eliminate? If our dog has a DQ
but we still want
to run around in a circle on hard floors under a haze of
hairspray next to the
poodle ring, why shouldn't we? If our dog has a DQ, the judge
should easily
identify it and remove us from the ring.

How is a judge supposed to know that a dog has had her
shoulder reconstructed due to OCD (another real-life example)?
Or if there is a
ring full of out of standard dogs, are we expected the judge
to know the
difference between 27" and 28" just from looking at them or
should
they just wicket every dog that enters their ring? If a white
spot is low on
the chest and the dog never sits, how will the judge know to
look for it?

This is likely why, as per AKC, to compete in an AKC
Conformation show, your dog must be free of disqualifying
faults.

We know our dogs. Except in rare cases, we know if our
dog has a DQ. This makes them ineligible to compete in the
breed ring. While
judges should eliminate them from the ring if they see them
(especially around
temperament!), we, as people interested in preserving our
breed, should take a
hard look at our responsibilities to only bring dogs into the
ring we know are
valid competitors.

**Is it my responsibility to only bring dogs I believe
are breed quality into the ring or is it the judge's job to
only award points
to dogs that are recommended for breeding?**

Let's take a different look at competitors' responsibilities versus judges' duties in a different way. In this scenario, all dogs in the ring are free of DQs. However, one severely lacks type, the other has poor structure, and the last is a collection of minor faults. In this hypothetical scenario, everyone in the Beauceron community can agree (Ha. That's funny. Everyone in the Beauceron community agrees on something...) that the dogs are not breeding stock.

Should the competitors have brought those dogs into the ring?
Should the judge withhold points?

While conformation may have been created as a way of evaluating breed stock, it's a sport subject to handler skill in many ways. Beyond that, it's a source of livelihood for pro handlers who may not know the standard or whose clients don't understand the standard.

There is no clear answer here. At the end of the day, there is never a clear way of determining if dogs are "breed worthy."

The best in the ring may not be a dog appropriate for breeding, or they may be a breed-worthy dog for some breeders, but not for others. The pup that's a collection of minor faults may have a pedigree behind them that's highly desirable and could be paired to mitigate those faults.

At the end of the day, it's my firm opinion that we are fulfilling our requirements as competitors if we bring dogs into the ring that are free of DQs. Past that, it is up to the judges to award points to dogs they feel, as per their expert opinions, are valid breeding stock. That is what we are paying for.

Is it ethical to "stack the deck" by purposefully arranging for dogs and handlers to promote a pre-selected winner in order to help "finish" them?

If competitors are bringing all dogs free of DQs, as per my last question, this would mean they're fulfilling their duties even if they're stacking the deck. It's back on the judge to evaluate what is in front of them, not what wasn't brought into the ring.

Conformation is a sport. Winning means you get this hypothetical breeding "gold star."

If you solely take the ethics of conformation as a sport, we could debate whether this is shitty until the end of time. It follows the letter of the law – no rules were broken. Instead, this highlights why AKC conformation is the way of giving that "gold star" is inherently flawed.

How much grooming is too much grooming?

I wanted to include this question because it is one that we have clear answers to. Let's start with trimming...

According to the AKC Beauceron breed standard,

"The Beauceron is exhibited in the natural condition with no trimming." If you trim the coat, you are actually **creating** a disqualification in your dog for this sport. There's no gray area here.

That one was easy! Let's move onto another hot grooming topic – changing the color of your dog's coat (chalking, dyeing, etc.).

According to the AKC's *Rules Applying to Dog Shows* (Chapter 11 Section 8-C):

"No dog shall be eligible to compete at any show and no dog shall receive any award at any show in the event the natural color or shade of natural color or the natural markings of the dog have been altered or changed by the use of any substance whether such substance may have been used for cleaning purposes or for any other reason."

Regardless of how commonplace the practice may be to blacken noses, add in hairpieces, or brighten up coats, this is unacceptable according to the rule book.

And, finally, for a bit of levity, prosthetic testicles are also not allowed, Chapter 11, Section 8:

"Procedures that would in and of themselves be considered a change in appearance by artificial means and make a dog ineligible for shows include, but are not limited to:...Alteration of the location of the testes or the insertion of an artificial testicle".

If your dog is a one ball wonder, you can't add a ping pong ball before entering the show ring.

I will reiterate a point that I made at the beginning of this article – I am wholly unqualified to write this article. I'm not a "conformation" expert. I have no tenure in the sport. I'm not a breeder. I did not write the breed's standard. I did not help formulate the AKC rule book. I'm an aspiring competitor and an avid follower of the sport. I have strong

opinions and am quite liberal in sharing them. I welcome discourse on what I've presented here. My final note on all of this, though, is that the rules are only worthwhile if we choose to follow them and make it unacceptable for others to ignore them. Let us hold one another to at least following the rules.