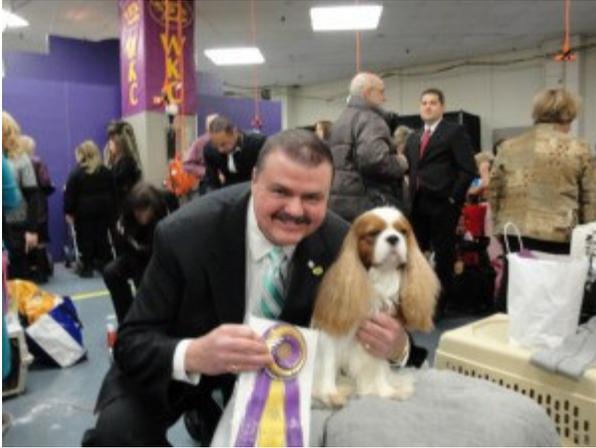


Gone to the Dogs ... in New York

February 22, 2011 By [Robyn Leave a Comment](#)



If you're going to New York and have to leave your own dogs (and cat) at home, there's one sure way to get your dog fix: arrange to be there in February, when New York goes doggy for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show at Madison Square Garden in Manhattan.

The 135th Westminster Dog Show was Monday and Tuesday, Feb. 14-15. The American equivalent of the crowning of canine royalty, this year it drew over 2,000 dogs from all over the world. Since I was already there, and love dogs, I leaped right into Manhattan's doggy mania.

For most of us dogs are cookie monsters, couch potatoes, stick fetchers, bed hogs, cat barker atters, and companions. Those into dog sports can pursue agility, tracking, herding, dancing, and therapy dog training. But dog shows? What do they have to do with me? I decided to find out.

First up, the Friday before Westminster, was the Big City Little Dog Fashion Show, sponsored by the New Yorkie pet fashion line to benefit the Angel on a Leash program. Begun by the Westminster Kennel Club in 2004, Angel on a Leash is a charitable program that promotes the human-animal bond through public appearances and training programs working with therapy dogs in such places as schools; health care, rehabilitation, and hospice facilities; and crisis intervention programs. It has a close tie to Seattle because it is championed by former Seattleite and current Westminster Director of Communications and Westminster television host, David Frei, and his wife, Cheri Frei. At the fashion show local New York celebrities paraded the runway with their canine partners, from pocket-sized Yorkies in frilly duds to a Great Dane in a crystal collar with an evening hat rakishly tipped over one ear.

Dogs were everywhere that weekend (unfortunately, also in the neighboring hotel room, where a Yorkie thought it was a rooster and yapped from 5-7 a.m. for three straight days). Taking refuge outside my room, I spotted Yorkies in pockets and hand bags. The big guys, from rottweilers to strapping redbone coonhounds, Scottish deerhounds (the eventual winner), and low-slung German shepherds. Dogs watered the sidewalk, pranced down the street, peered out from crates

stacked on luggage carts, and calmly rode the elevator as their handlers cheerfully responded to queries like: what is that? One answer: a Norwegian Buhund.



At the Affinia Hotel I followed the sign to the dog exercise room. That's where the people from Jog a Dog had set up two of their dog treadmills. Established 40 years ago by an inventor who trained German Shepherds for rigorous police and protection work (called schutzhund), today it's a thriving business catering to canine athletes, from conformation specialists (show dogs) to agility or tracking experts.

I met Jack, a 5-year-old yellow labrador from Miami, accompanied by his breeder and owner, Rosy Harkow. She uses the treadmill on the show circuit to avoid exercising Jack on the street, and also has one at her Florida kennel. Jack's mom, 10-year-old Maddie, is fit and healthy and still competing in agility because of the muscle toning and endurance she gets on the treadmill. Show handlers also use it as a gaiting tool, to improve the dog's pace and top line in the show ring. Both Jack and the dalmatian Gabe, trotted hard, stopping only to pose for photographs.

The Westminster Dog Show started early Monday morning. Most of the day's dogs and their entourages were already on site by 7 a.m. Since Westminster is a benched show, all the dogs for the groups showing that day had to be onsite all day and available to the public. I was relieved to see that I'm not the only one who fails to travel light: these dogs and their people had crates, blankets, toys, food, grooming tools, cooling fans ... everything you'd need to greet your public in style, two or three times over.

One intriguing breed is the beauceron. A rare breed that originated in northern France, this is a large black and tan herding dog that belongs in the American Kennel Club's working dog group. I met Gideon, who was being groomed by his owner, Marlene Palmer.



The show circuit for these two was an afterthought. Marlene purchased Gideon when he was 11 weeks old, to train as a search and rescue dog. Together they work for Klamath Search and Rescue in Klamath Falls, Oregon. When people suggested his conformation might make him a show dog, Marlene decided to go for it, which is how Gideon became a champion and was at Westminster (he did not win this year).

Marlene and Gideon started their search and rescue training early. While it normally takes two years to certify one of these dogs, Gideon was certified in 14 months. He works as a wilderness air scent dog, searching for lost people. The search team grids an area, and the dogs clear it by searching for the smell of a human, and if necessary can track by clothing. They can cover a lot of territory quickly, which is critical in finding lost and possibly injured people.



All morning long I snapped photos of dogs being primed for their big moment, their hair wrapped or snipped, while others snoozed or greeted visitors. Their humans educated people about their breed, whether they herded sheep or held down a lap in style. Their emphasis? While showing dogs is a sport they enjoy, the dogs are family first and foremost.

That's certainly what I understand, as I live with Murphy and Alki, two Cavalier King Charles Spaniels, members of the toy group, who were shown in their breed group at 8 a.m. Monday. As the Cavaliers pranced into the ring, and stopped before me, I glanced down at the dog in front of me. The handler turned to us and smiled poignantly. This was her dog's last show. He would be 13 in a month, and was enjoying the spotlight as he gamely trotted along. It brought tears to my eyes, as he was only a few months older than my beloved Cavalier, Murphy.

Glancing around, I recognized one of the handlers, a Cavalier breeder from the Seattle area. Wow! Three thousand miles from home and somebody I sorta kinda knew!

I had met Patrick and Tamara Kelly in Seattle years ago when I was involved with the local Cavalier club. They fall into a rare category in the dog world: they are breeders, owners, and handlers. That's right, in a sport where owners buy top dogs and hire professional handlers to show them, these owners breed and show their own dogs.

And they won, with their champion boy, three-year-old Miles.

Backstage I waited for the hoopla to settle so I could congratulate them. Patrick is a big man, tall and broad-shouldered, and he was so excited he was bouncing. While they'd been showing for 15 years, this was their first win at Westminster—something only a few people ever accomplish.

He told me how they got started with their beloved first Cavalier, Maggie May, and how the old ones have a special place in our hearts.

I said, "Yes, that's true, my oldest is 12-1/2." I grinned as our eyes met, because the best was coming. "And heart clear." That's a rarity in Cavaliers, and is, in fact, what breeding and living with dogs is all about: enjoying long happy lives together.

Patrick's eyes went wide in surprise. "Murphy?" he asked, holding his breath in anticipation, clearing remembering my little dog with the daunting health challenges.

I laughed, saying, "Yes, my Murphy."

And Patrick leaped sky high, pumping his arms in the air.

That's really what dog shows are all about, even the grand old ones like Westminster. It's people and dogs having fun together, whether they're in the show ring or tussling over the remote at home.

And it's people like Patrick Kelly, who've just reached the top of their sport, and ten minutes later are leaping high in the air to celebrate the life and health of a dog they hadn't seen in 10 years, but knew in their hearts. And remembered.

Because our dogs are family.

Note: a slightly shorter version of this article appeared 2-21-11 in the West Seattle Herald, courtesy of Robinson Newspapers, Seattle. Catch it here:

<http://www.westseattleherald.com/2011/02/21/features/gone-dogs-%E2%80%A6-new-york>