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The Dog Show Vs. The Olympics: The Judges' Dilemma

Why Olympic snowboard judging is better than Westminster Dog Show judging

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Last Tuesday evening I faced a tough choice. Should I watch snowboarder Shaun White's quest for Olympic glory on the halfpipe or the finals of the Westminster Dog Show? It was a no-brainer. Dog shows are one of my guilty pleasures. (I once spent two days following a professional handler who took me under her wing and explained to me the intricacies and politics of the rarified world of show dogs.) But, alas, my wife, doesn't share my enthusiasm for the pageantry of Westminster. So we watched Shaun go down in flames, and I recorded the Westminster finals for later viewing. The next morning, I watched a perky wire-haired fox terrier named "GCH Afterall Painting The Sky" (a.k.a. Sky) win Best in Show.

I was not surprised at Sky's victory. There have been 106 Westminster Dog shows since 1907, and wire-haired terriers have won 14 of them. That's nearly twice as many Best in Shows as the next most winning breed, the Scottish Terrier (8 times). Westminster judges, it seems, have a penchant for the terrier group. Over the past century, terriers have won Best in Show at Westminster 48% of the time. Ironically, the types of dogs Americans favor as pets don't have much of a chance at Westminster. Beagles, for example, have only won once, and Labrador Retrievers, America's most popular dog over the last 20 years, have never won the Big Show.

By my count, obscure breeds have won at Westminster about 80% of the time compared to 20% by popular breeds. Why is there such a blatant mismatch between the breeds of dogs most people pick for their pets and the refined preferences of dog show judges. Could Westminster judging be biased?

The Problem of Determining Who Is "Best"

Winners in sports like speed skating and hockey are determined objectively: it's the person who gets to the finish line first or which team scores the most goals. But in events like snowboarding, ice skating, or the Westminster Dog Show, who is "the best" is much more subjective. There is, however, a world of difference in how winners are determined in snowboard competitions and in dog shows. Here are four reasons why halfpipe judging is better than dog show judging.

1. The "Number of Judges" Problem

At the highest level of any sport that relies on the subjective judgments of experts, judges have tough jobs. They must pick the single "best performer" among a handful of elite athletes. Nearly all sports reduce bias in these situations by having multiple judges. The winner of the 2014 Olympic half-pipe was determined by a panel six judges who independently scored each run of

each athlete. As an additional control for bias, the scores of the highest and lowest judges were dropped. In contrast, the winner of Best in Show at Westminster was chosen by the preference of single judge, Betty Regina Leininger.

2. The Apples and Oranges Problem

In the Olympic halfpipe finals, judges score competitors on their ability to pull off, essentially, the same bag of tricks. Not so at the Westminster finals. Though highly experienced in all facets of dog showdom, Ms. Leininger was faced with a formidable task. When she stepped into the show ring last Tuesday night, the 2,000 plus competitors had been whittled down to seven dogs. They ranged from a pony-sized bloodhound to a seven pound miniature pinscher. This would be like picking the “best Olympic athlete” by comparing the performance of the winners of the women’s giant slalom, the men’s luge, the biathlon, the women’s ski jump, and the men’s figure skating events. Faced with the canine version of apples and oranges, dog judges are not supposed to compare the animals directly against each other. Rather, their charge is to evaluate each dog on how close it comes to an elusive Platonic ideal -- the official American Kennel Club “breed standard.”

3. The Ambiguity Problem

According to psychometricians, a fundamental key to making reliable expert judgments is that the criteria for evaluation be specific. Ambiguity is the judge’s enemy. By this criterion, AKC breed standards are, well, bizarre, particularly when it comes to behavior and temperament. For example, according to the official breed standard, the ideal Boxer is supposed to exhibit “constrained animation” and the Chow Chows should have “an innate dignity and an aura of aloofness.” My favorite is the breed standard dictating that Clumber spaniels be “independent thinkers” and have a “pensive expression.” Huh?

4. The Measurement Problem

In the 2014 Olympic halfpipe finals, judges could assign up to 100 points to a snowboarder for each of their two runs. They based their decision on criteria spelled out in the official International Ski Association Judges’ Manual. These included the height of the jumps, the variety and difficulty of the tricks the snowboarder performed, the degree of their risk-taking, and the execution of their performance. The handbook clearly specifies the deductions for errors. A “light hand touch” will cost a snowboarder between 1 and 10 points, whereas a “light butt check” is an 11 to 20 point deduction. The winner of the men’s 2014 Olympic halfpipe was Iouri Podladtchikov, who, on a near perfect run, earned 94.74 points. Shaun White was favored to win, but he made a couple of small errors. He came in fourth with 90.25 points. What about the scoring system at Westminster? The answer is simple – there is not one. When the judge was asked in a press conference why she selected Sky over the Portuguese Water Dog or the Bloodhound (the clear crowd favorite), the judge replied, that the dog “just said, ‘Pick me.’”

Why I Still Like Dog Shows

There you have it. The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show finals violate the major principles of good judging: There is only a single “decider” who has to compare apples to oranges using

ambiguous criteria without any numerical scale. Compared to the Olympic halfpipe finals, Westminster is a craps shoot.

But the truth is, I'm still a dog show fan. I love the passion of the owners, the skill of the handlers, the bizarre beauty of oddities like Pulis and Neopolitan Mastiffs, and even the arcane mysticism of the judging. What can I say? It's a guilty pleasure.