

“Our Day Will Come”

America’s top dog is still a Westminster underdog

by Jen Reeder

Labrador retrievers broke a record this year when the American Kennel Club announced the Labrador retriever as the most popular breed in America, staying in the top spot for the 23rd consecutive year and surpassing the poodle’s record of 22 consecutive years at Number 1. While the breed’s popularity as a pet comes as no surprise to Lab lovers, they can find it bewildering that Labs have never won top honors at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

Westminster (www.westminsterkennelclub.org) is the most prestigious dog show in America. Started in 1877, it is America’s second-longest continuously held sporting event (after the Kentucky Derby). More than 2,000 dogs from registered AKC breeds compete each February in New York’s Madison Square Garden to be named the ideal representation of their breed. There are several rounds of judging: First, the best of each breed is chosen, then those dogs advance to the group judging – Labs are in the sporting group. Then, the seven Best in Group winners compete for Best in Show, an honor offered at the show since 1907.

Labs have never won Westminster’s Best in Show title – or even Best in Group. But many people in the Lab world and even within Westminster itself would like to see it happen.

David Frei, director of communications for the Westminster Kennel Club and television co-host of its dog show since 1990, says it would be exciting if a Lab won at Westminster. “I love Labs! I think they’re the greatest, I really do,” Frei says. “All you have to do is look at AKC registrations to know that the world agrees with me.”

Frei says he’s grown fond of the breed from spending so much time with them in the therapy and service dog world, where Labs are “great players.” But their loving temperament and willingness to please doesn’t necessarily



David Frei, television co-host for the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, meets one of the Labrador contestants during competition. (Photo by Lisa Croft Elliott/WKC)



Labs often fare better in competitions that judge skills instead of conformation to a breed standard. Agility was offered for the first time at Westminster in 2014. (Photo by Toni Lieto)

translate to being “showy” in the ring. By contrast, he noted that terriers don’t look to their handlers for directions – “they’re on their toes looking for trouble” – and have won 46 times at Westminster. Still, many breeds have never won at Westminster.

“Mathematically, it just figures that there are going to be some breeds that haven’t won. It’s just one of them happens to be America’s most popular dog,” says Frei. When a Lab finally wins, Frei predicts there will be an “amazing” public response, similar to the reaction when the first beagle, Uno, won Best in Show in 2008.

“He’ll start getting invitations to the White House and to ride on a float in the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and to throw out the first pitch at Major League Baseball games,” Frei says, adding with a laugh, “When a Lab does win, we’re going to have to rent him an apartment in New York City to fulfill all of his – or her – media requests.”

The closest a Lab has come to a win at Westminster in recent memory (a Lab took second in the sporting group in 1978) was a fourth-place finish in the sporting group in 2009 and 2010 by James, a black Lab bred by Mary and Michael Wiest of Beechcroft Labrador Retrievers in Warren, New Jersey. The couple started breeding Labs in 1969 after watching a black Lab enthusiastically retrieving a bumper from the frigid water off Long Island Sound. “He’d be coated in ice and shake, and the ice

would come off and he was ready to go again,” she remembers. “We said, ‘That’s our breed.’”

Years later, she says the Labrador world was thrilled when James got “a piece of the group” by placing fourth at Westminster, with many people saying, “Finally!”

“My heart still goes pitter-patter with that,” Wiest says. “That wasn’t just James’s or our win – that was a Labrador win. We were finally acknowledged at the Garden.” She thinks what helped set James apart was the way he could move in the ring. “Movement proves soundness and it proves balance,” she describes. “Plus he was a character. When he went into the Group ring and he heard the crowd cheer, his head came up like, ‘Look at me!’ It was the cutest thing to see his temperament come out.”

In addition to excellent movement, another advantage James had was his conditioning. “I keep my dogs in a pretty fit condition – they’re not fat, but they’re not skinny either. But in the breed ring, a lot of people like them a lot heavier, and in the end that doesn’t work well,” she says. “If you want to be acknowledged by group judges, you have to present a dog to them that they like, and that’s a dog in condition and that can move.”

When asked whether a Lab will ever win at Westminster, Wiest proclaimed, “Our day will come.” In fact, she has “high hopes” that her dog Baccara, a female black Lab with great movement, will go all the way in 2015 – she was the runner-up female in “Best in Breed” at Westminster in 2014 and has won numerous competitions since then.

A KC approved judge Bonnie Threlfall judged 76 Labrador retrievers for Best in Breed this year at Westminster (the most entries of any breed). Though she is registered to judge many different breeds, she says Labs are one of her favorites to judge. “I just enjoy the breed so much, and I’ve been around them all my life,” she says. “When you get a class of really top quality Labradors – and there are some fabulous Labrador breeders – it’s just so much fun to judge.”

She reports that all Labs have to have the basic breed requirements, which include a tail like an otter’s (to act as a rudder when swimming); a black, chocolate, or yellow coat; and specific height and weight measurements depending on the gender. But nuances set them apart. “It’s the overall dog that best fits the picture of the standard in my mind,” she says. “They’re all going to have faults – we have yet to see the perfect dog of any breed. So when you’re judging, you try to reward the virtues.”

Threlfall said no matter how pretty a dog is, it will not be rewarded unless it is structurally sound and otherwise



A head study of "Nell," Ch. Winroc Online CD, RA, SH, owned and trained by Marianne Foote, who competes in Labrador Retriever Club National Specialty events. (Photo by John Eriksson)

healthy. "They're all our pets at the end of the day, and we want healthy, happy, normal pets."

Fred Kampo, president of the Labrador Retriever Club (www.thelabradorclub.com, the AKC's parent club for Labs), says the organization stresses the importance of breeding healthy dogs and testing for diseases to avoid defects being bred into Labs. Since its inception in 1931, the Labrador Retriever Club and its members have donated over \$350,000 to health research for Labs.

"We've done a tremendous amount of work in our breed of making a healthy breed," Kampo says. "We're trying to maintain that standard to make a healthy dog."

Fran Smith, DVM, vice president of the Labrador Retriever Club and owner of Danikk Labrador Retrievers in Lonsdale, Minnesota, says Labs often fare better at skills competitions such as retriever field trials and agility, instead of more subjective competitions like Westminster that judge conformation to breed standards. "Standards describe an ideal in a written format. For example, what they say about the Labrador eye, 'the eye should be pleasing in expression.' That's a pretty nebulous term. What you might think is a pretty eye, I might not like."

She thinks one reason why Labs haven't won at Westminster is because of coat color. Black was the first

recognized color for the breed, so because black Labs have been bred the longest, many competitors have black coats. "Labradors suffer from what is called the 'Black Dog Syndrome.' If you ask any shelter or rescue, the last dog likely to be chosen as a pet is a black dog, and since many of our really, really good Labradors are black, they don't have the visual appeal of something light colored and flashy."

Flashy can mean dogs with fancy grooming, such as poodles ("You can trim yourself a whole new dog," Smith said), or attitude. Then there's the almighty dollar – many winning dogs at Westminster have been "campaignned" with an advertising budget of \$70,000 to \$100,000 in special dog show magazines that are sent to judges. "Labs aren't typically backed by that kind of money," according to Smith.



James took Group 4 at Westminster in 2009. Here he is pictured with Judge Bob Ennis, presenting the ribbon, and handler Fabian Negron. (Photo by WKC)

Marianne Foote, former board member of the Labrador Retriever Club and owner of Winroc Labrador Retrievers in Livermore, California, says Labs are popular because they aren't just meant to be show dogs, as readers of this magazine are well aware. Their adaptability, mild temperament, and friendliness make them excel in service roles. "The variety of tasks that a Labrador can do is what makes it popular," Foote says. And of course, Labs often excel as family companions for a variety of outdoor adventures, such as hiking, running, and swimming.

"I know the focus is why don't they win in dog shows, but why do they win in our hearts? It's because of all these other things that they do." 