



left to right: John; Mary; David
Dogs, left to right: Golden Retriever;
Labrador Retriever; French Bulldog;
German Shepherd Dog; Poodle

The National Dog Show's AMAZING GENESIS

AND THE PARODY MOVIE, 'BEST IN SHOW'

BY DAVID FREI

PHOTOS BY SIMON BRUTY/NATIONAL DOG SHOW

Which of the following quotes from the movie *Best In Show* pushed NBC Vice President of Sports Programming Jon Miller (nearly 22 years ago) into suggesting that his network put a dog show on television on Thanksgiving Day, replacing *It's a Wonderful Life*?

- "I used to be able to name every nut that there was. Pine nut, which is a nut, but it's also the name of a town. Pistachio nut. Red pistachio nut. All-natural white pistachio nut,"
—Harland Pepper (Christopher Guest).
- "We are so lucky to have been raised amongst catalogs,"
—Meg Swan (Parker Posey).
- "Don't water the plants, they're plastic,"
—Gerry Fleck (Eugene Levy).
- "He went for her like she's made outa ham,"
—Buck Laughlin (Fred Willard).
- (musical): "God Loves A Terrier!"
—Gerry (Eugene Levy) & Cookie Fleck (Catherine O'Hara)

"All of them," Miller says, laughing. "My wife, Jan, rented the DVD for us one winter night in 2002 and we laughed so much that we had to watch it a second time."

The next day at work, Miller went to his boss and made his suggestion. He was "tossed out of the office," he remembers. He kept working on it, and eventually got to Jeff Zucker, head of NBC Entertainment at the time, who liked the idea, especially given that *It's a Wonderful Life* was not drawing big numbers, and that NBC no longer had NFL football on Thanksgiving.

Boom, off to the races. Miller called Purina and got a sponsorship "yes" right away. Then he called Wayne Ferguson, Board Member and TV coordinator for the Kennel Club of Philadelphia, which had been staging dog shows for over 100 years. Ferguson made some suggestions as to what the dog show world would like to see, and they shook hands.

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Miller went after some television talent to host. His first call was to Seinfeld alum and "America's 7th most interesting man," John O'Hurley. Here's the conversation:

O'Hurley: "Hello."

Miller: "Woof, woof."

O'Hurley jumped on board.

Next up: Yours truly, longtime USA Network host of the Westminster Kennel Club. With the blessing of Westminster, the American Kennel Club, and Ferguson and KCP, it was a no-brainer for me. After a couple of years working around her Olympics schedule, Mary Carillo joined the team to be the backstage feature reporter.

Miller got Paul and Kathy Carson of Carson International, longtime producers of "The Incredible Dog Challenge" on NBC to agree to stage the event. He signed Steve Griffith of Vizion PR, one of the best sports and entertainment PR people on the planet, in my humble opinion.



David Frei trying to figure out why all-breed dog show judges don't like the Lab (left) and the Golden as much as others in competition for Best in Show.



National Dog Show co-hosts David Frei (left) and John O'Hurley contemplate why it is that the immensely popular breeds Labrador Retriever (left) and Golden Retriever rarely win Best in Show honors at all-breed dog shows around the world.

DAVID FREI ADVANCES THERAPY DOG MOVEMENT WITH 5TH ONLINE SYMPOSIUM AT ROWAN UNIVERSITY

**UNIQUE CONFERENCE OFFERING BEST PRACTICES FOR
INTERNATIONAL AUDIENCE OF THERAPY PRACTITIONERS
SET FOR FRIDAY, DEC. 8**

BY STEVE GRIFFITH

The National Dog Show Therapy Dog Symposium at Rowan University, co-founded by prominent dog world personality David Frei, presents its fifth annual day-long conference for practitioners, advocates and aspirants on Friday, December 8. The event is open to the public, including the veterinary healthcare community, with registration available at Therapy Dog Symposium Dec. 8.



National Dog Show Therapy Dog Symposium co-founders Michele Pich (left) and David Frei

A non-profit partnership between National Dog Show Charities and Rowan University, the symposium launched in 2019 with over 200 on-site participants at Rowan University. In 2020 and 2021, instead of taking the years off amidst the global pandemic, symposium organizers went virtual, presenting a day-long livestream which attracted an international audience of over 200 online participants.

This year, the program is available both onsite at Rowan University and via Internet for both domestic and international participants. It will emanate from the Glassboro, New Jersey, campus (30 miles from Philadelphia), home of The Shreiber Family Pet Therapy Program at the University's Wellness Center.

The all-day series of informational sessions features an array of prominent experts in the field, including Frei and Michele Pich, the assistant director of the Shreiber Family Pet Therapy Program at Rowan. The conference has established itself as the most prominent platform for the Therapy Dog and Veterinary communities to share information and develop best practices.

The keynote speaker is Ann Howie of Olympia, Washington, an author (*Teaming with Your Therapy Dog*) and expert on animal-assisted intervention and animal-assisted therapy. Other speakers will be announced and listed at Therapy Dog Symposium Dec. 8.

"We have successfully navigated the pandemic, adapted to virtual engagement, and found our niche," said Frei, the 2019 keynote speaker. "With the COVID-19 pandemic mostly in the rearview mirror, we look forward to growing dramatically now with the help of our partners in the dog world, sponsors including Purina, and Rowan University, which has committed to growing the event within its wide-ranging community and its newly-announced school of veterinary medicine, opening in 2025."

Steve Griffith is a public relations and marketing specialist who has promoted The National Dog Show, the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, and AKC Meet The Breeds in a 30-year career. Employers and clients over the years include Manhattan College, NBC Sports, Madison Square Garden, and Vizion Group PR, his Philadelphia-based agency. He is the owner of a purebred Australian Shepherd and the curator of a list of attributes that dogs have in abundance and that humans desperately need.

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The great Winston (registered name GCHP Fox Canyon's I Won The War At Goldshield) was raised by San Diego Chargers defensive end Morgan Fox.

And we all set to work to get ready to put the show on television on Thanksgiving Day, 2002, in a wonderful two-hour time slot right after the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade.

The show that November drew nearly 20 million total viewers in its very first year and was the number one show on NBC that week. And it has continued to compile big viewership through the next 20 years, with the past few years—even in the pandemic—viewership remaining strong at 20-25 million total viewers each year. With constant re-broadcasts on Thanksgiving weekend and throughout the year, one can only imagine what that aggregate total viewers number is with the show's third decade under way.

"We were already pretty sure that people love their dogs, and we continue to be thrilled every year with our audience," Miller said. "We love the idea that multiple generations within families are watching the show, waiting for dinner, in the meantime, being entertained by the visuals and the competition.

"And we are even more thrilled that we are able to put significant support back with the Kennel Club of Philadelphia and to dogs everywhere, purebred dogs and rescue dogs, to animals and their people in need.

"The event has done great things for all involved, and is certainly a great performer for our network," he says.

Much of that original production team lineup is still in place. Alexa Maarema is the producer now, and meets the challenge every



Handler Perry Payson and Winston, 2022 Best in Show at The National Dog Show Presented by Purina.

year to come up with great features to go along with the competition. The show has a home at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center in Oaks, Pennsylvania, a Philadelphia suburb.

And the Kennel Club of Philadelphia, led by President Ferguson, continues to provide an entertaining and competitive dog show for all.

As for Miller, he has added to his "holiday" claim to fame by creating the NHL Winter Classic, which the *New York Times* said "has stolen New Year's Day."

And now, welcome to the 22nd edition of the National Dog Show, hosted by the Kennel Club of Philadelphia, presented by Purina. And thank you Christopher Guest, Parker Posey, Eugene Levy, et al, for capturing Jon Miller that fateful winter night in 2002. ■



New York Magazine once called David Frei "probably the most famous human in the world of canines." He has been the co-host of NBC's National Dog Show Presented by Purina since its inception in 2002, a role that he perfected in 27 years as the longtime (1990-2016) co-host of USA Network's Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. David was director of communications for Westminster from 2003 to 2015, and in 2018, he was named to the Dog Writers Association of America's Hall of Fame. He has been a breeder-owner-handler and judge in the world of purebred dogs for more than 40 years with his Afghan Hounds, Brittany's, and Cavalier King Charles Spaniels. But David's true passion comes from the work that his dogs have been doing over the past 30 years as Therapy Dogs in Seattle and in New York City at places including the Ronald McDonald House, Memorial Sloan Kettering Cancer Center, and at the VA Medical Center. He is an author and the founder of a much-recognized charity, Angel On A Leash, which creates and advocates for Therapy Dog programs nationwide.

David Frei and his Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Therapy Dog, True Dat.