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National dog show draws more than 1,900 canines and 200 breeds to the Philly region

The dog show winner will be announced on Thanksgiving as always, but this year will be bringing two new heroes, too. (Think Butkus.)



A few stars of the show, and their human handlers, at the Kennel Club of Philadelphia's annual National Dog Show on Saturday, which was held in Oaks, Montgomery County.

Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

by Rita Giordano

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A veritable sea of flaxen-hued and meticulously coiffed fluff fringed the periphery of Show Ring 9 as canines, handlers, and owners awaited the start of the golden retriever breed competition Saturday morning at the [Kennel Club of Philadelphia's annual National Dog Show](#).

With goldens among the most represented breeds in the show business, quite a few of them were dog show veterans, and their people were taking the competition seriously.

“No!” barked one handler firmly — in about the same tone you’d use for a puppy chewing up one of your best shoes — when asked by a bystander if she could pet the dog.

Kathy Wickum, 26, a dog walker and groomer from Preston, Md., and her August, a good-size 7-month old, were a different story.

“We’re still very new to this. We’re nervous. Well, *me*,” Wickum said, looking down at August, who was in full sploot repose, looking up with a gentle, golden grin. “He goes with the flow. His favorite part is the hot dogs.”

And, truth be told, there were lots of treats, and pets, and even butt scratches from owners and admiring strangers alike at this much-loved annual gathering of so many good boys and girls.

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Held at the [Greater Philadelphia Expo Center in Oaks](#), this year’s competition was slated to draw more than 1,900 dogs on Saturday and Sunday and a record number of 205 breeds, according to event spokespeople. The pooches and their people came from 40 states, D.C., and five foreign countries.

The champions in the seven group categories and the winner of the coveted Best of Show will be announced Thanksgiving Day, when the competition is shown on television.

But many, many spectators come every year for the joy of being around so many different kinds of pups. Since it is the only benched dog competition in the nation, that means the dogs are in specific areas of the expo center floor when not competing. So the public can see them up close. And if you ask politely — and not in the heat of competition — the owners will often allow permission to pet their prize canines.

Twin sisters Allison Leitch of Chattanooga and Jocelyn Leitch, of Atlanta, 48, decided to make a weekend of it at the dog show. Both sisters took selfies with Austin, a 130-pound bullmastiff from Nova Scotia who works as a law enforcement therapy dog, offering emotional support to witnesses while they give police statements and to officers after they have a rough tour of duty. He even has his own police badge, said owner Laurie Francis, 49, of Halifax.

Austin definitely made the Leitch sisters' day.

"He's got that big head. He's awesome!" Allison said.

"He's a sweetheart!" said Jocelyn, who got a smooch from Austin just as she snapped the selfie.

Two local bullmastiffs with the dog show's Therapy Dog Ambassador Team are also going to be filling high-profile — and very fun — roles soon.

Wasabi, a 4-year-old female from Pottstown, and Rufus, a 6-year-old male from Malvern who competed Saturday, will both serve as honorary Butkus stand-ins at the first [Rockyfest](#) in Philadelphia. Being held from Dec. 3 through 8, it will be several days of celebratory events in honor of the forthcoming 50th anniversary of the release of the first *Rocky* movie. As all *Rocky* fans know, Butkus was Rocky Balboa's beloved bullmastiff, his pet and running partner.

Wasabi's owner, Tamar Paltin, 36, an animal sciences professor, said this is right up her pup's alley, including as a breed ambassador.

"She's so excited," the owner said. "She loves meeting people. She loves doing events and being out in public. I think it's going to be really, really fun for her."

Rufus' owner, Michael Devine, 69, an investment consultant, said the first *Rocky* movie piqued his interest in the breed, and he has had several since. But Rufus, he said, is special.

"He's like a magnet for people of all ages, including the smallest kids. He's got the best personality, and he really likes other people. He likes other dogs," Devine said. "I couldn't ask for any more from him."

With so many dogs at the show, there were lots of tales of special canines — too many to tell.

Greta, a long-haired dachshund from Lancaster, helps her child-therapist owner in her work with youngsters. Manus, a wirehaired dachshund from Mechanicsburg, Pa., regularly visits a memory-care center and has a gift for calming even the most agitated residents and helping them remember their own dogs.

Bear, a Newfoundland from Egg Harbor, N.J., was still a puppy last summer when he saved the life of a dog friend who had swam out too far. Daisy, a Greater Swiss Mountain Dog from New Oxford, Pa., lives on a farm and helps guard the other animals that live there from predators like coyotes and bears.

Some of the doggo competitors just showed a special knack for spreading joy. Earlier in the week, Prince Louis, a fluffy white Samoyed from Clementon, and Kanji, a Cape Cod, Mass., Lancashire heeler, which is a new breed to the show, both won [the competition's first "smile-off."](#)

Dagda, a golden retriever from Wilmington, was not a competitor in this year's show. Rather, Dagda and owner Bob Jarvis, 74, a retired IT manager, volunteer with [PAWS for People](#), a therapy dog organization.

Saturday, Dagda was one of the dogs providing comfort to whoever wanted, or needed, it in the show's Therapy Dog Ambassador area. But when it comes to providing solace as man's best friend, Dagda was already a champ. Jarvis said

Dagda is a regular at a local suicide-prevention program, a senior housing program, and a local elementary school.

Said the owner: “Every kid in the school knows his name.”

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