

THE SATURDAY EVENING POST

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Editor's Letter



BEST IN SHOW

Full disclosure: The holiday season, hands down, is my favorite time of the year. A time for family, friends, feasts, and traditions that kick off on Thanksgiving — a day that has become synonymous with food, football, parades, and ... pooches?

Now in its 23rd year, *The National Dog Show* has become a beloved Turkey Day tradition for millions of dog lovers across the nation. It certainly is in our home.

Every year, after the turkey is in the oven and before the family arrives and the feast and the football begin, we plop down on the

couch with our pups, Betty (Boop) and Clark (Bark), both mixed-breed rescues who welcome any opportunity to snuggle up for one-on-one time with their humans. If it's to watch a dog show, so be it.

And every year on *The National Dog Show*, pedigreed dogs of all shapes and sizes vie for top prize. Millions of fans in living rooms around the country decide which breed to root for and guess who'll win Best in Show.

But the show almost didn't make its way to the small screen.

In 2002, Jon Miller, then the president of acquisitions and partnerships for NBC sports, was looking for something to boost ratings on Thanksgiving Day during the two-hour gap in between the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade and football. As writer Amy S. Eckert explains in "Going to the Dogs" (page 30), he came up with the idea of televising a real major dog show while watching the mockumentary film *Best in Show*. Christopher Guest's hilarious take on high-stakes dog shows that was set in Philadelphia. Miller reached out to the Kennel Club of

Philadelphia Dog Show (which has been around for over 100 years) about the idea, secured Purina as a show sponsor, and took the pitch to his bosses. Though it took some convincing, he got the green light.

In November that year, the rebranded *National Dog Show Presented by Purina* aired, and, as Eckert writes, "the resulting television ratings surpassed the network's wildest expectations."

And the rest is history.

People love dogs, so it comes as no surprise that the annual parade of the pedigreed has become one of the most popular television events on Thanksgiving Day.

While we watched the show in 2023, the shih tzu and the toy poodle left Clark unimpressed. The black brindle boxer caught Betty's eye, just not as much as the squirrel prancing across the front lawn. Besides, they already know they're best in show in this house.

The entire staff of the *Post* wish you, your families, and your pets a happy and healthy holiday season.

Patrick Perry
Editor-in-Chief

Amy S. Eckert



"While the televised *National Dog Show* is reasonably recent, dating from 2002,

Philadelphia's live dog event is nearly 150 years old, dating all the way back to 1876," says Eckert, who takes readers behind the scenes of the canine competition in "Going to the Dogs" (page 30). The two-hour special has become a Thanksgiving-day tradition, viewed by millions. "Turns out Americans have loved their pet parades for a very long time!"



GOING TO THE DOGS



As the beloved tradition of *The National Dog Show* passes the 20-year mark, the Thanksgiving Day mainstay remains as popular as ever

By Amy S. Eckert

A woman with long blonde hair, wearing a dark blue t-shirt and grey cargo pants, is kneeling on a blue carpeted floor. She is looking up at a small, scruffy brown dog that is jumping high into the air. The dog is wearing a silver, sequined vest. A white frisbee is suspended in the air above the dog's head. The woman's right arm is extended upwards, and her left hand is holding another white frisbee. The background is a blue wall with several large, colorful floral arrangements in pots. A blurred crowd of people is visible in the background.

Leaps and bounds: Highly skilled agility dogs showing off their athletic skills is one of *The National Dog Show*'s top attractions.

A

small brown mop of a dog trots a neat circle around the royal blue carpet of the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center. Her eyes are barely visible beneath a thick corded coat that looks a bit like dreadlocks. The dog's name is Abby and she's a Puli, an uncommon breed thought to be descended from the Tibetan Terrier, according to the show's host. It's impossible to watch Abby scurry around the stage and refrain from smiling.

Just minutes later, a glamorous little Shih Tzu named Comet scampers around the arena with her handler, her long gold-and-white-streaked hair sweeping the floor and pinned back from her eyes with a bejeweled blue hairbow. Later, a black-and-white spotted Great Dane named Carson will take a spin around the stage, a dog so large his head reaches the level of his handler's chest.

Abby the Puli, Comet the Shih Tzu, and Carson the Great Dane represent some of the 213 AKC-recognized breeds and varieties who regularly compete in *The National Dog Show Presented by Purina*, televised each year on Thanksgiving Day. The two-hour NBC special explains the history and celebrates the beauty and diversity of the

nation's finest purebred dogs. The program has also become a Thanksgiving tradition for many families across America, one that takes its place right alongside pumpkin pie and football.

Creating a National Dog Show

The National Dog Show is the televised version of the annual dog competition of the Kennel Club of Philadelphia (KCP), a prestigious organization which traces its history to the late 19th century. But it was in 2002 that the KCP found its canine contest elevated to the national stage thanks to an unlikely champion at NBC Sports.

"We had a bunch of friends over on a cold, miserable Saturday night in January 2002," says Jon Miller, president of acquisitions and partnerships for NBC Sports and the owner of a Cavachon named Cooper. "Together we shared a bottle of wine and watched *Best in Show*, which my wife had picked up at Blockbuster. We all laughed hysterically."

The popular mockumentary premiered to critical acclaim in 2000. Written and directed by Christopher Guest and starring actors Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara, *Best in Show* parodied the highly competitive world of purebred dog shows and their at times cutthroat pet owners. The movie became an instant pop-culture classic.

Best in Show highlights the fictional Mayflower Kennel Club Dog Show, a riff on New York's Westminster

STEVE DONAHUE/NATIONAL DOG SHOW PHOTOS
PREVIOUS: STEVE DONAHUE/NATIONAL DOG SHOW PHOTOS



Taking it in stride:
Working group winner Carson, a Harlequin Great Dane, trots around the show ring with his handler.

Kennel Club Dog Show. But writer/director Guest located his fictional competition in Philadelphia — home of the KCP.

After Miller and his friends finished watching the comedy, the group called it a night. But Miller remained intrigued.

"I ended up watching it a second time," he says. "It was just such a wonderful, fun movie."

As luck would have it, NBC Sports was looking for fresh Thanksgiving Day programming. The network already had a blockbuster in the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, which aired in the morning. But they were looking for something to keep viewers tuned in, and NBC had recently lost the rights to broadcast NFL games. So Miller suggested his team produce the KCP's annual dog show, which happens to take place in mid-November, and air it in the slot immediately following the parade. The pushback was significant at first.

"We're a sports division," says Miller. "We don't generally do these kinds of things."

Still, thanks to Miller's track record and his persistence, the network decided to give the idea a go. Miller quickly secured Purina as a lead financial sponsor. Then he rounded up the cohosting talents of David Frei, an AKC-licensed judge who has officiated dog events around the world, and actor John O'Hurley, best known as J. P. Tererman in the hit TV show *Seinfeld*.

The resulting television ratings surpassed the network's wildest expectations. *The National Dog Show* earned five times the viewership of Frank Capra's *It's a Wonderful Life*, which had previously filled the post-Macy's parade time slot.

"*The National Dog Show* really became an annual holiday classic, a tradition," says Miller. "I've been fortunate to be involved in creating a number of television programs, but this one is special because I know it touches families."

The initial success of the canine competition was no fluke; the show has maintained its popularity over two decades, drawing more than 20 million viewers every year. David Frei and John O'Hurley have cohosted every broadcast since the show



Life imitates art: Christopher Guest's comedy classic *Best in Show*, starring Eugene Levy and Catherine O'Hara, was the inspiration for televising *The National Dog Show*.

debuted in 2002 and were joined by NBC Sports analyst Mary Carillo in 2016. Fans love the opportunity to root for their favorite dogs, to watch for unexpected antics, and to join what has become for many families must-see TV.

"*The National Dog Show* has captured the public imagination," says Steve Griffith, the director of communications for the show and for the KCP, as well as the owner of an Australian Shepherd named Murphy. "First of all, it follows the parade, which everyone is watching anyway. It's a holiday, so people are home to watch it. The show airs before the day's football games have begun. And then, of course, *The National Dog Show* features dogs, which appeal to the entire family."

Making of the Best in Show

More than 20 years after its inception, some 30,000 dogs representing 213 AKC-recognized breeds and varieties have participated in the KCP event that has become popularized as *The National Dog Show*. But despite the high-powered celebrities, bright lights, and television cameras of the last two decades, the KCP's goals remain much as they have since the organization launched its

first dog show in 1879: dedication to educating the public about dog breeds, promotion of responsible pet ownership, and general admiration of canines. The KCP predates the better-known American Kennel Club (AKC) by five years.

Each of the 2,000 dogs that participates in *The National Dog Show* is classified by its specific breed and also assigned to one of seven

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categories, based on the characteristics and functions the dogs were originally bred for: Terrier, Toy, Working, Sporting, Hound, Non-Sporting, and Herding.

In preliminary rounds, dogs of the same breed compete against one other. One dog from each category is deemed Best of Breed, and they advance to the group competition. In the final round, the seven group champions vie for the prestigious title of Best of Show.

One of the things viewers love about *The National Dog Show* is that it is a *benched* show. At a benched show, canine competitors are required to be on display and in their assigned area or “bench” unless they are competing, being groomed, or exercising. This enables spectators to meet the canines up close and ask their handlers and groomers about their specific breeds, fulfilling part of KCP’s stated mission of educating the public about responsible ownership.

For America’s more than 65 million pet-owning households, a holiday focused around family must, by definition, include their fuzzy babies.

From the ubiquitous to the rare, breeds of all sorts find their way into *The National Dog Show* competition. Participants range from common German Shepherds, Poodles, and Dalmatians to Otterhounds, Norwegian Lundehunds, and the Canaan Dog, the national dog of Israel.

And while you might guess that judges would have a bias toward the more extraordinary breeds, over the course of *The National Dog Show*’s 22-year run, Best in Show honors have

been spread across 19 different breeds. Standard Terriers, Poodles, and Bulldogs have been among the winners, as have a less common Sealyham Terrier named Stache, who won in 2023, and a Scottish Deerhound named Claire, who in 2020 and 2021 became the only back-to-back Best in Show champion in the show’s history.

While the KCP competition takes place live over two days, *The National Dog Show* is edited down to two hours for broadcast on Thanksgiving afternoon. Interspersed

THE SEVEN GROUPS

Each of the 213 AKC-registered breeds and varieties are assigned to one of seven groups representing characteristics and functions the breeds were originally bred for. The First in Group from among each of these seven groups compete against each other for Best in Show.



SPORTING

The invention of the gun led to the development of sporting dogs, or gun dogs, to aid in hunting upland game birds and waterfowl, performing at the direction of the hunter. It is generally the duty of pointers and setters to point and mark game; for spaniels to flush game; and for retrievers to recover dead and wounded game. **Includes:** Cocker Spaniel, Irish Setter, Labrador Retriever



TERRIER

All but two of the terriers evolved in the British Isles. The geography of the specific area helped to determine the exact duties of each, but it usually involved hunting vermin and varmints, from rats to badgers. These are dogs of great determination, courage and self-confidence, with a great willingness to go to ground in search of its quarry. **Includes:** Scottish Terrier, Miniature Schnauzer, Russell Terrier



TOY

Toy dogs have been around for centuries and are bred for one purpose: to be companions for their humans. Many have been bred down from and still resemble their larger cousins. Their small size and portability make them ideal for city dwellers and those with limited space. **Includes:** Toy Poodle, Shih Tzu, Pomeranian, Pug



WORKING

While the uses and appearances of the dogs in the working group vary, most are powerfully built and intelligent, performing various tasks for their people. These dogs are working farm and draft animals. They guard homes and livestock and serve heroically as police and military dogs, security dogs, and guide and service dogs. **Includes:** Boxer, Doberman Pinscher, Mastiff



HOUD

Hounds come in a great variety of sizes, shapes, and coats. Most of these breeds were developed to hunt somewhat independently for their humans, who usually followed on foot or horseback as the hounds chased down the prey. This group consists of scent hounds (dogs that hunt by tracking a scent) and sight hounds (who spot their game and run it down). **Includes:** Beagle, Basset Hound, Dachshund, Whippet



HERDING

Herding is a natural instinct in dogs that is seen in the wild. Humans have used that instinct to their advantage on farms and ranches with herding dogs whose sole purpose is gathering and moving livestock from one place to another. **Includes:** Australian Shepherd, Border Collie, Pembroke Welsh Corgi



NON-SPORTING

The AKC initially registered all dogs as either sporting or non-sporting. Eventually, hounds and terriers were split from the sporting group. Toys and working dogs were split from the non-sporting group, and herding dogs split from working dogs. Today, the non-sporting group is literally every breed that is left. **Includes:** Bichon Frise, Bulldog, Dalmatian

Source:
The National Dog Show

within footage of action from the arena — dogs being groomed, examined, trotted around the expo center, and rewarded with doggie treats — the show cuts away to air canine trivia, interesting mythology, history behind various breeds, and other tidbits about dogs. For example, the world's largest dog breed is the Mastiff, averaging 160–230 pounds; the Skye Terrier is among the rarest dogs in the world, with only approximately 450 in the U.S.

If there's a chance that *The National Dog Show* will fade in its appeal, there's nothing to indicate it will happen anytime soon, according to organizers. In fact, there's every reason to believe the event has become a holiday mainstay, one that fits nicely between family favorites like the Thanksgiving Day Parade, turkey dinner, and afternoon football. And after all, for America's more than 65 million pet-owning households, a holiday focused around family must, by definition, include their fuzzy babies.

Hosting the Nation's Largest Dog Show



John O'Hurley

For cohost John O'Hurley, participating in a dog-oriented TV show is no chore. Dogs have been an important part of the actor and entertainer's life since the age of four, when he spent afternoons exploring the swamp near his Massachusetts home with a little Dachshund named Taffy. And while O'Hurley is best known as a performer, he is also the author of three books, all

of which revolve around canines. His children's book *The Perfect Dog* has even been adapted for the stage.

"I knew nothing about dog shows when I signed on to host *The National Dog Show*," says O'Hurley. "I'd never been to one, had never seen one, so my learning curve was rather extraordinary. But I've always, always had a dog in my life." He is currently the owner of two rescue dogs, Mia and Charlotte.

Thanks to years of hosting *The National Dog Show*, O'Hurley has become sufficiently knowledgeable about the qualities that competition judges are looking for — the physical traits that form the hallmarks of a breed, the dog's attentiveness, its carriage and its temperament — that he can sometimes predict which participant will win.

But part of the fun of hosting the show are those unscheduled — and often untelevised — moments when a dog reverts to simply being a dog, doing precisely as it pleases.



A well-deserved treat: A Sealyham terrier named Stache beat over 1,800 other dogs to take home the Best in Show title at last year's *National Dog Show*.

CATCH THE SHOW

The National Dog Show Presented by Purina airs on NBC on Thanksgiving Day, 12–2 p.m. EST. The live event is hosted by the Kennel Club of Philadelphia on November 16–17 at the Greater Philadelphia Expo Center. For more information or to purchase tickets to the live event, visit nds.nationaldogshow.com.

One of O'Hurley's favorite moments came in the show's early years, when a large Great Dane paused in its circuit around the stage to look the actor straight in the eyes, squat, and deliver what the host likes to call "an editorial comment on my performance."

O'Hurley appreciates the show's emphasis on the ways dogs contribute to human lives: canines who assist with law enforcement and the military, guide dogs, physical and psychotherapy dogs, and working dogs who herd or pull weight. But he thinks most viewers relate to their personal connection with a dog, the juxtaposition of a model dog onscreen and their beloved family dog, the one curled up beside them on the sofa and watching *The National Dog Show* along with everyone else.

"Whether you're four or you're 94, *The National Dog Show* is something that everybody can watch and enjoy," says O'Hurley. "Because across the country, we have a love affair with our dogs. And always have."

Amy S. Eckert is a freelance travel writer and photographer whose work has appeared in numerous publications, including *National Geographic Traveler*, *AARP*, and the *Chicago Tribune*. Visit amyeckert.com.