

NEWS | DOG SHOW

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At this world-class show, every dog had its day, every pooch had a tale behind it

By Rita Giordano

Staff Writer

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.

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.



Various Cardigan Welsh Corgis line up as they are being judged. Photos: Tiger Williams / Staff Photographer



Diane Coyle, of Tabernacle, N.J., gets her 4-year-old Golden Retriever, Indiana, ready for his showing.

"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.

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“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., Lan-



A few stars of the show, and human handlers, at the Kennel Club of Philadelphia’s annual National Dog Show. Tyger Williams / Staff Photographer

cashire 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 Amba-

sador 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 elemen-

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

✉ rgiordano@inquirer.com
📞 609-217-8357
🐦 [rgiordano725](https://twitter.com/rgiordano725)

HOLY FAMILY

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Tim Hamill, director of athletics, grew up in Mayfair, played soccer at Holy Family, and graduated from the university in 2004. He began working for Holy Family soon after that.

“My sister went to school here,” he said. “It’s like a family tradition.”

Kharon Randolph, 24, a graduate student in mental health counseling, grew up in Northeast Philadelphia, got his bachelor’s at Holy Family, and stayed.

“It’s really a family environment,” he said. “I love that everybody knows everybody. I love that if you need help or need support, you’re able to get it.”

Holy Family was founded by the Sisters of the Holy Family of Nazareth, and members of the order served as university president until Prisco was named its first lay leader in 2021. Though its roots are Catholic, only a little more than one-third of Holy Family students identify as Catholic, Prisco said. Nearly 54% of first-year students are white, with about 15% each Black and Latino.

About 16% of new students come from outside Pennsylvania.

Senior Sophia Paz, student government president, is from Louisiana. The sports management and marketing major had been looking for colleges in cities where she wanted to live, including Philadelphia, and one that

was Catholic, having attended Catholic school her whole life.

“Temple and Drexel were too big for me,” she said. “Holy Family was just an excellent find because my class sizes have been like 15. I have 11 students in one class.”

Adding academic programs, sports

To stay competitive, Holy Family has added some academic programs, including cybersecurity, and revamped its business major. It is considering adding a master’s program in biotech, Prisco said.

The college is planning to build a center for innovation and entrepreneurship at its Newtown

West site, and is putting an addition and new glass facade on Holy Family Hall, its oldest and most iconic campus building.

“It’s going to give us a big, open reception room,” Prisco said.

Its signature nursing degree program, which enrolls about 40% of Holy Family students, has remained strong, she said.

About 93% of students overall are employed or in graduate school a year after graduation, the school said.

The college, where tuition and fees run \$35,330, also started six new athletic programs in the last five years, including flag football for women, men’s lacrosse, baseball, and women’s bowling. Its number of student athletes has

grown from 175 to 375 this year.

Keller was a communications major at Holy Family, where he also served in student government. He recalls fondly the kindness of the sisters who took an interest in his well-being that night.

As associate director of corporate, foundation, and government relations, his job in part is to secure grants for student scholarships.

“I wanted to pay that back,” he said.

✉ ssnyder@inquirer.com and hbrubaker@inquirer.com
📞 215-854-4693 and 215-854-4651
🐦 [ssnyderinq](https://twitter.com/ssnyderinq) and [InqBrubaker](https://twitter.com/InqBrubaker)