

A Metamorphosis

by Lisa Dubé Forman

Is the AKC fast on its way to becoming a national coordinator and registry for performance and companion events, including all dogs, instead of primarily a registry promoting the sport of purebred dogs and breeding for type and function? Having looked carefully at the data, despite all the positive spin on the aggregate figures coming out of the meeting minutes, one cannot help but consider this likelihood. I have to wonder if the AKC Board of Directors, albeit resignedly, has held a tacit acceptance of this for some time now. If so, this is a logical reason for creating the Canine Partners program or perhaps it was serendipity and they just 'fell into it.' More on this important program below.

The registration and entry numbers disseminated in the Delegate Meeting Minutes are not complicated. They are telling and portray a decline, plain and simple. The most recent litter and dog registration information provided by the AKC Chief Financial Officer (CFO) describes a continuous drop. There was a 7.7% decrease in litter registrations and a drop of 10.6% in dog registrations when comparing 2012 to 2011. For further statistics on the staggering registration losses, see *The Big Picture, Canine*

Chronicle The Annual 2012-13 issue.

Although there was an increase in revenue, this was largely due to an increase in registration prices transitioning in 2012. Notwithstanding, this increase was offset by the aforesaid declines. Additionally, the CFO warns that this revenue increase will be short-lived, because the dog registration price increase is not repeated in 2013. Logic prevails that if the declines in dog and litter registrations continue, despite the increase in fees for such, the positive net income will be short-term.

The good news is that entries for competitive events in the year 2012 are almost all positive. Almost. The bad news is that Conformation entries, which traditionally dominate the list, are in a continual decline and are duly challenged by Companion events. The fastest growing event in our competitive sport is Agility. As reported, Agility surged by 11%, ending the 2012 year with over 1,150,000 entries. Agility is now the second sport to exceed more than one million entries in a calendar year, the first being breeding stock, all-breed competition with 1,435,266 entries ending 2012. Companion events totaled 1,368,164 entries for the 2012 calendar year, which includes Obedience and Tracking, both of which were

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up about 5.5%, though Rally was down 8.5% and has continued its descent. Performance events were also up with the largest increase in this segment seen in Lure Coursing, which had a 31% increase in entries, followed by an increase of 3,000 entries in Hunting Tests and an increase of 1,500 entries in Herding Trials.

Conformation events did not fare well. All-Breed 2012 show entries declined by a modest 1.5% or 22,300, but this is a persistent decline. Limited Group shows were up 4% or 1,650 dogs but Specialties were down by 3,600 entries. Open Shows and Beginner Puppy shows contributed by 300 and 2,200 entries respectively. So that we are clear on this: total Conformation entries include All-Breed shows, Limited Group shows e.g., Hound Shows; Specialties, Open Shows and Beginner Puppy Shows. Therefore, combined conformation entries were 1,575,717. I speculate that this number also received a slight but much needed boost from the Grand Champion competition taking place during Best of Breed judging of which there were 6,766 titles earned. We do not know the entry boost to the Best of Breed class for 2012 but numbers show in 2010 there was an increase of 40,000 Best of Breed entries when the program was introduced. It's more than plausible that this is a viable number, at a minimum, to use for 2012, when considering the contributions of the GCH. title to overall conformation entries. If not for this title, most likely the total conformation entries would show even greater declines. *Note: This year AKC reports that the Board voted to change the Open Show regulations to make Open Show competition only available for FSS breed clubs, including those FSS breeds eligible for the Miscellaneous Class. This will be effective for competition on or after January 1, 2014, and will be renamed "FSS Open Show."*

All told, 2012 Companion events totaled 1,368,164 entries. Just 207,553 entries shy of taking the lead over combined conformation events. Performing simple arithmetic; with 8,242 Companion events held in 2012, each needs only an increase of 25 entries during the calendar year 2013, to overtake Conformation as the leading event. Is this the direction that AKC is oriented towards, as conformation events become marginalized due to continuously declining litter and registration numbers? The numbers reveal an interesting pattern.

Conformation Events - All-Breed Dog Shows:

- 2012:** 1,435,266 All-breed entries. 137,964 Specialty entries. 6,766 Grand Championships earned.
- 2011:** 1,455,971 All-breed entries. 141,589 Specialty entries. 6,767 Grand Championships earned.
- 2010:** 1,473,751 All-breed entries. 140,508 Specialty entries. The first six months of the Grand Champion Title program yielded an increase of 40,000 more Best of Breed entries and 4,212 Grand Championships earned.
- 2009:** 1,516,098 All-breed entries. 144,900 Specialty entries.
- 2008:** 1,641,004 All-breed entries. 156,770 Specialty entries.
- 2007:** 1,698,640 All-breed entries. 152,625 Specialty entries.
- 2006:** 1,710,625 All-breed entries. 157,724 Specialty entries.

Companion Events:

- 2012:** Agility 1,157,000 entries. Obedience 142,918 entries. Rally 68,000 entries. Tracking Tests 2,100 entries. The AKC Canine Partners Program had 3,820 titles earned (obedience, rally, agility).
- 2011:** Agility 1,040,071 entries. Obedience 135,620 entries. Rally 74,417 entries. Tracking Tests 2,025 entries. The AKC Canine Partners Program had 3,070 titles earned (obedience, rally, agility).
- 2010:** Agility 947,137 entries. Obedience 125,223 entries. Rally 80,530 entries. Tracking Tests 2,061 entries. *April 1, 2010, Mixed-breed dogs were first allowed in obedience, agility and rally trials. The first 8 months of the program, the AKC Canine Partner Program had 1,989 titles earned (obedience, rally, agility).*
- 2009:** Agility 870,603 entries. Obedience 123,831 entries. Rally 85,506 entries. Tracking Tests 2,018 entries.
- 2008:** Agility 838,392 entries. Obedience 122,076 entries. Rally 91,117 entries. Tracking Tests 1,930 entries.
- 2007:** Agility 826,408 entries. Obedience 126,826 entries. Rally 107,888 entries. Tracking Tests 1,862 entries.
- 2006:** Agility 745,853 entries. Obedience 122,251 entries. Rally 104,700 entries. Tracking Tests 1,851 entries.

Performance Events:

- 2012:** Over 250,000 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2011:** 240,000 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2010:** 240,000 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2009:** 240,000 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2008:** 239,000 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2007:** 239,786 entries. No breakdowns available.
- 2006:** 278,784 entries. No breakdowns available.

As we can extrapolate from the above data, clearly accompanying steep losses in dog and litter registrations are the obvious, declining breeding-stock (conformation) entries of nearly 17.5% when comparing these previous six years. Despite the addition of the popular Grand Championship title program.

For me, the data speaks volumes as to the permeation of disinterestedness and indifference amongst purebred dog breeders, exhibitors and owner/handlers in breeding stock competition. There does however seem to be great enthusiasm in the Companion and Performance events, e.g. Agility, Coursing Ability. One of the beneficial and key directives that AKC implemented is the 2010 Canine Partners program. This is a valuable and progressive program, and may or may not stopgap the hemorrhaging of revenue, albeit not permanently. I wrote on this program in a previous article *The More the Merrier, Canine Chronicle December 2011*, and am an avid supporter. The Coursing Ability Trial had a 31% jump in entries for 2012 alone. Having written on these issues for years, I am committed to the belief that as purebred dog breeders strive to gain a foothold in the public relations battle, it will require engaging the American support engine; the recruitment of

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the dog owning public. Our enemies have successfully swayed and exploited the disgust and empathy of the public and we have to challenge these activists, fighting fire with fire. As I am fond of saying, you do not win a football game by playing defense. You have to run offense. The mere act of opening up our doors to mixed-breeds appears to be a long overdue triumph, and this crowd-puller should continue as long as the programs are run efficiently, progressively, equitably and marketed aggressively. I do worry though about the continuous decline in Rally, as it is not the AKC self-proclaimed “sport that is taking the nation by storm.” Rally is supposed to be a successful steppingstone from the AKC Canine Good Citizen program to the world of obedience or agility, designed with the traditional pet owner in mind. There is a possibility that the number of participants have naturally progressed to the higher levels however, where is all the fresh blood? Where are the new participants from the mixed breed public? This is where the much ballyhooed new advertising firm should focus their energies.

For those who are unfamiliar with it, AKC details the Canine Partners program, which includes mixed-breeds and purebreds not eligible for AKC registration. Dogs are eligible to participate in all kinds of AKC events like AKC Rally, Agility, Obedience and Coursing Ability and will be eligible for the AKC Therapy Dog title. The AKC’s Canine Good Citizen program (which teaches responsible dog ownership) now offers an official AKC title that dogs can earn as well. They can also receive AKC recognition of certain North American Flyball Association (NAFA) titles and titles of the Barn Hunt Association (BHA).

Back to the numbers. The breeding stock participants, along with their revenue, will most likely continue their withdrawal at a slow but steady average annual rate of 2.85%, or 17% plus in the past six years. Perhaps an AKC metamorphosis to a regulatory companion and performance coordinator and registry for all dogs will ensure its livelihood and continuity. The AKC may, inadvertently or not, be positioning themselves for such a mutation considering the corresponding rise in Companion Event entries. A dog registry that registers and lists all dogs, with the newly rooted and Canine Partner Program for mixed breeds taking hold, Purebred Alternative Listings (PAL), and Foundation Stock Services (FSS) dogs.

I do believe we still will have conformation events in the future, but remain unconvinced these will be administered by AKC. One scenario is that breeder stock competition will diminish to a level likened to an exclusive boutique event by virtue of further attrition, which itself was and is caused, in my opinion, by management’s staid, conservative, backward thinking of the conformation event program. This may not be so far off the mark as the numbers speak for themselves. Despite AKC no longer disseminating data on litter and dog registrations, we can make a logical attempt to deduce answers. Using 2010 figures (the last published data) of 563,611 registrations — AKC did not publish the number of registrations in 2011 or 2012 — but reported that 2011 registration revenue was \$2 million or 8% less than 2010. Venturing forward with these numbers, if the going rate is \$30.00 per dog for registration (the least expensive fee) then, theoretically, registrations were down by approximately 66,666 from 2010 data. This leaves us with ap-

proximately 496,945 dogs registered in 2011. The CFO reported earlier that 2012 registrations were down 10.6% from 2011, hence there were approximately 444,269 dogs registered in 2012! Recent media data from the 2013–2014 APPA National Pet Products Association Survey states 56.7 million households own a dog, and there are 83.3 million dogs in the United States. My estimate of 2012 AKC dog registrations is less than 1% of the total dog population in the United States, .53% to be more accurate. It would be prudent for the AKC to make a change to its course and fixate on Companion and Performance events targeting mixed-breed and PAL dogs. The upside is that AKC taps into a seemingly endless revenue trove.

As for purebred dog breeders, an unlikely scenario is that AKC will come around immediately and make changes to the conformation event programs, instating mandatory judges critiques and a grading system that demands accountability of judges quality of selections. I also believe they should require cyclical judges education requirements, for example 20-25 hours of continuing education every three years, to instill confidence back into exhibitors experiences during judging. Another is the division of our conformation event formats, one being Owner-Handler Only conformation shows geared towards the backbone of the sport who comprise 80% of our entries, with no professional handlers allowed. Other ideas floated is the elimination of group judging at breeding stock competitions to refocus attention on the breed ring. Perhaps another alternative will be that the United Kennel Club (UKC), will capture and increase purebred dog registrations as well as conformation entries. *Note: the UKC does not allow professional handlers and requires judging critiques or grading of entries.* Further, a new body regulating our breed clubs, stud books and judges training will evolve as the one organization to represent the United States into and as a member of the World Canine Organization, a.k.a. Fédération Cynologique Internationale (FCI).

It is quite possible that soon AKC will have to survive primarily on revenue from Companion and Performance events, along with the Canine Partners enrollment revenue and Listing Fees from PAL dogs. A positive is that a majority of entries currently in Companion and Performance are purebreds who will continue to compete therefore generating entry and registration revenue. However, the negative is that an unknown number (to me at least) of these dogs do not reproduce, so this could be similar to the question of the chicken and the egg. In spite of that, the number of households with dogs in the United States is increasing and the enrollment fee for Canine Partners and the PAL listing fee are currently \$35.00 each. Looking at the statistics provided, it seems more than plausible that AKC can sustain or prosper with more than 83 million candidates — with a reported 75% being mixed breeds, 78% being neutered and only 22% being intact. It just may have to do so for its own survival.



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