

A Page from a National Obedience Judge's Journal



By Virginia Cummings

2005 National Obedience Judge

Conformation Judges and Obedience Judges look upon invitations to officiate at

specialties as an honour. When one is nominated as a perspective judge and ultimately elected, it is of particular significance. When the club involved is the national club for one's own breed, the honour is even more greatly felt in that it is a vote of confidence and respect bestowed upon the recipient judge. I've been blessed over the years and have been selected to judge various National and Provincial Specialties but the biggest honour came when I was invited to judge the first ever Canadian National Australian Shepherd Club's event.

The evening before the trials, I went to the venue in order to view my ring and acclimatize myself to its configuration, etc.

The first impression I had upon entering the area, was the overwhelming sense of team effort and co-operation that had taken place amongst the organizing committee and members. There on tables laden with prizes was the largest and nicest array of prizes I've ever seen. One of the organizers greeted me and together we toured the tables.

The quality was incredible.

There were "old Aussie Pals" milling around or waiting for their turn in the fun obedience match that was taking place. Some came over to say hello. If the individual wasn't entered under me the next day, we shared a hug and a quick catch-up on where our lives had taken us. If the person was entered, the greeting was limited to "catch you after the trials".

I had a chance to visit with some of these folks the next day – others I missed and wish I could have had a chance for a quick chat.

The next morning as I was setting up my ring, I felt the energy that always accompanies an obedience trial but it was sweeter because the only breed I saw was our Australian Shepherds.

Our breed comes in such a variety of colours, sizes and shapes that it is particularly interesting to see so many representatives gathered together. The knowledge that my judge's book would only list Aussies was just plain exciting.

I scanned the group of exhibitors warming their dogs up for the about-to-begin trial and thought that training methods are as varied as our breed. Folks were happy, however, and there was an atmosphere of good-cheer. Once we were into the swing of things, I was struck with the similarity our breed exemplifies while working. The Aussie has a unique expression when working. It is an expression of quiet confidence and ability. This notion hadn't occurred to me before due to the fact that I'd not judged so many Aussies on one day.

One after another the handler / dog teams stepped into the ring and set up to begin their individuals. One after another, the dogs looked up at their handlers with the same kinds of expressions – "we're here – we're fine – we're gonna be great!"

The dogs were immaculate. The handlers were tidy and had dressed up a bit in honour of our event. Some exhibitors were extremely nervous – that's never a surprise – and as a judge, I try to set folks at ease. When I'm exhibiting I try to remember that I'm there for my best friend and it is my job to set my nerves aside and be aware of how my dog is doing and what I can do to make the experience nicer for him or her. After all, my dog didn't ask me to participate in obedience training and trialing but rather is a willing participant in a sport for which I have a

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a passion and is happy to go along with me trying to respond to my bidding.

Set-Up and the first Step-Off are critical to the tone of the round. Time and again I was struck by the fluid movements of the dogs. I saw Aussies accommodating their handler's goofs. I saw Aussies trying their best to maintain heel position as handlers stepped too wide or too short. I saw Aussies and handlers moving together in unison as would really great ballroom dancers. My high in trial team exemplified this kind of fluid dancing. Beautiful! I saw quiet communication and love between handlers and dogs.

Because the Aussie is such an athlete, I saw the same kinds of body-use over and over again and I was particularly struck by this because of the conformation of our breed. Whether the individual is a breed ring winner or not, the Aussie has the body shape that allows for some pretty impressive movements.

I saw Aussies performing about-turns while hurrying around the handler on an outside lead – no small feat as the dogs working this maneuver were off balance and yet they somehow managed to maintain position. Aussies dogs stutter step in order to maintain proper heel position and accommodate quick, unexpected movements on the handler's

part; I saw Aussies finding their stride upon approaching the jump: I saw Aussies picking up the dumbbell while at the same time, pivoting on a front foot in order to place the hind foot where the front foot had been in order to hurry back to the handler; I saw Aussies gathering their rears into themselves in order to sit while maintaining a stationary front position; I saw Aussies maintaining stays while keeping their attention on the task at hand rather than gazing upon their neighbours and goings-on outside the ring.

I saw a great breed participating in obedience, conformation, herding and agility -- and best of all, when the trial was finished and I was saying "hello" to some of these wonderful dogs, I saw the often present Aussie grin. What a cool breed!

There were some special awards made that day. A couple put a lump in my throat and made presenting the honour all the sweeter because of the special connection I had to the particular dogs. The junior handlers were delightful and it was such fun to see them so pleased with their rounds and their dogs.

There were youngsters competing and oldsters – human and canine. Each made me smile and my day passed all too quickly.

Speaking of "oldsters" -- and if I'm totally honest -- my favourite class is the Veteran class. These dogs are so pleased to be once again strutting their stuff. The joints don't move the way they did a few years ago, but the fire in the eye is still there and the Aussie Sense of Humour is alive and well.

A couple of those old kids had smiles on their faces as they went through their Novice routines.

We're lucky to be dog trial participants – we're even luckier to go to trials with Aussies. I was luckier still to be have been honoured with the assignment of judging the first National Obedience Trials for the Canadian National Australian Shepherd Association and it's an experience I'll remember fondly – always.

Gin Cummings

