

The "Show Dog" Syndrome

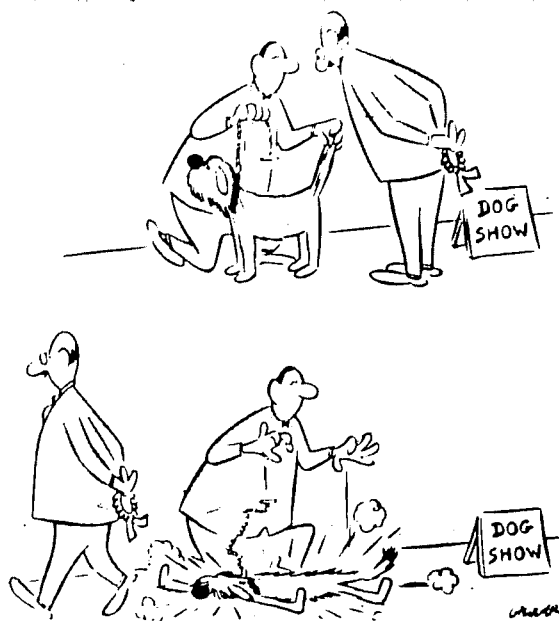
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I have received many letters on the problem of "show dog" syndrome from owners who send their dogs to compete at various dog shows throughout the country. Owners describe this syndrome as follows. The dog literally "goes to pieces" in the show ring and becomes a "nervous wreck." The typical pattern is one of a healthy, outgoing dog with a seemingly stable temperament and of sound lineage having a complete breakdown.

Often, but not invariably, the dogs that do develop the syndrome are not accompanied on the show circuit by their owners. They are under the charge of one or more different handlers. However, the competence and reputation of the handlers do not seem to contribute to any significant degree, although a possible connection between cruel or negligent treatment and this syndrome should not be ruled out. The following case history is illustrative of the etiology and fate of these dogs.

"Spice," a three-year-old Belgian sheepdog, was loaned by her original owner to a friend who wanted to have a dog so that she could compete in the dog show circuit. The dog went to several shows and then was returned to the original owner, who soon after went abroad and left the dog with a handler to be "finished" at a number of other shows. The dog subsequently went to pieces at one show, resisted going into the ring, and when in the ring, acted fearfully and was defensive when approached. When the dog returned to the handler's home, "she curled up and went to sleep," showing little interest in food and acting unresponsive to the handler. Veterinary examination ruled out any organic cause underlying this behavior. The handler gave the dog to a breeder and trainer of Belgian sheepdogs, who, after several weeks, was successful in drawing the dog out of what symptomatically resembled reactive depression.

One may reason that the frequent changing of ownership undermined the dog's sense of emotional security, which ultimately led to complete withdrawal, analogous in many respects to reactive depression in man. This syndrome has been demonstrated in dogs by Overmeier (1981) under controlled laboratory conditions, using intense unavoidable electrical shock. In spite of the questionable ethics of these so-called "learned helplessness" studies (which comparative psychologists regard as animal models of reactive depression in man), Overmeier has successfully shown that it is the element of *insecurity*, of inability to predict and control traumatic environmental stimuli, that underlies the development of this syndrome. Dogs



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that are able to predict when the shock will occur, and/or are able to avoid the shock, do not develop learned helplessness or reactive depression. It may be argued, therefore, that a dog that has the security of its owner or a close emotional attachment to one particular person while on the dog show circuit would be less insecure than a dog being handled by one or more strangers or persons with whom the dog has not developed a close bond. Owners of show dogs should therefore be advised to accompany their dogs whenever possible to the shows, provided of course their dogs are emotionally attached to them. As an alternative, they should endeavor to place their dogs with the same reputable handler so that the animals may develop a strong secondary social attachment (Scott and Fuller, 1965). This attachment should be sufficient to provide the animals with the emotional security that will help protect them from developing the "show dog" syndrome.

This syndrome may be particularly relevant to those researching the companion animal-human bond. Further research is needed to verify that the "show dog" syndrome is a consequence of treating dogs as mere "objects," during which time the animal's emotional bond is disrupted, leading ultimately to complete withdrawal and reactive depression.

References

- Overmeier, J.B. (1981) Interference with coping as an animal model. *Acad Psychol Bull* 3:105-118.
- Scott, J.P. and Fuller, J.L. (1965) *Genetics and Social Behavior of the Dog*. University of Chicago Press, Chicago.