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How the National Dog Show became your favorite Thanksgiving tradition



The National Dog Show's Best in Show champion: Whiskey is a 3-year-old Whippet. (Mark Makela/for The Washington Post)

By **Roxanne Roberts**

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OAKS, Pa. — It's the most wonderful time of the year . . . for dog lovers. We speak, of course, of a sacred Thanksgiving tradition for millions of Americans: Before the turkey and football, they curl up on the couch to watch the National Dog Show.

The contest airs on NBC after the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade, allowing Mom, Dad, kids, Grandma — and yes, even the family pet — to see the four-legged competitors, root for their favorite breeds and guess who will win best in show.

The 20 million fans glued to the television this year already know the answer: GCHP Pinnacle Tennessee Whiskey, a fawn-colored whippet from Sugar Valley, Ga. Whiskey, with his elegant lines and big brown eyes, beat the crowd favorites — a Doberman pinscher and King Charles Cavalier spaniel — and the front-runner, a wire fox terrier that had tons of buzz and a glittering string of best-in-show victories from around the globe.

Aside from being wildly popular, the two-hour broadcast has a secret, rare in this day of breaking news and social media: The show was actually held last weekend, but the results remained closely guarded for six days.

“I have a great friend from the Irish bar we used to hang out at who's a big-time sports gambler,” says David Frei, who has been a co-host of the National Dog Show since it first aired in 2002. “He would always ask who won. I said, ‘You're not trying to turn this into some sort of a bet, are you?’ He's said: ‘No, no. I'm going to dinner with my family and I just want them to think I'm pretty smart about dogs.’”

And that, my friends, is the simple genius behind this show. People love dogs. They love to own them: There are 90 million pet dogs in the United States. They love to shop for them: Owners will spend \$59 billion this year on food, vet care, toys, outfits and more, including dog birthdays. And they love to watch them on Thanksgiving: The National Dog Show is the highest-

rated canine contest in the country, trouncing both Puppy Bowl on Super Bowl Sunday and the Westminster Dog Show in February.

Frei's co-host, actor John O'Hurley, calls it the "happiest day of the year. I've always said I'm a better person with a dog in my lap. They just have an infectious influence on our lives. You see it in this room: Everyone was happy today."

All dressed up at the National Dog Show



The competition featuring more than 2,000 dogs and 200 breeds airs on NBC after the Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade

The show is the brainchild of Jon Miller, president of programming for NBC Sports. In 2002, the Bethesda native saw Christopher Guest's movie "[Best in Show](#)," a comedy about a fictitious dog show. The lifelong dog lover

thought a *real* dog show could work on television if the time slot was right — say, a family holiday. He persuaded Purina to sponsor it, and contacted the oldest dog show in the country: The Kennel Club of Philadelphia, which first exhibited dogs at the 1876 Centennial Exposition.

Then Miller went to his bosses, who were dubious that a dog show could be called sports, or even good television. But reruns of “[It’s a Wonderful Life](#)” after Macy’s parade had lousy ratings, so Miller got the green light to have those two hours — but only for that year.

”You know what?” Jeff Zucker, who was then his top boss, told him. “It can’t do worse. Let’s give it a shot.”

The renamed “National Dog Show” first aired in November of that year. Miller prayed it would match the ratings of “It’s a Wonderful Life,” about 1 million viewers. He was at the movies the next morning when Zucker called: “Did you see the numbers for your dog show?” More than 18 million people had watched — bigger ratings than most prime-time hits. “That doesn’t happen a lot in our business,” says Miller. An overnight classic (and a big moneymaker for NBC) was born.

From the beginning, the show has had two co-hosts: Frei, an internationally recognized expert on purebred dogs and father of the therapy dog movement, and dog lover O’Hurley, best known for playing J. Peterman on “Seinfeld.”

“I’m the brains behind the operation,” jokes Frei.

“And I take that genius and make it palatable for America,” counters O’Hurley.

The two are close friends and rock stars at dog shows, constantly being stopped for selfies in person or, failing that, with their cardboard cutouts. But both insist the dogs deserve the attention.

“We want to get as many camera close-ups of the dogs so that everybody has a chance to feel what we feel about them,” O’Hurley says.

About 10 years ago, Hall of Fame sportscaster Mary Carillo added the show to her duties (pro tennis, Olympics) because she adores dogs. She’s worked both Westminster and this show — Westminster is a bit more reserved, she says, while the National Dog Show is more fun.

“It’s a more relaxed atmosphere here,” she says. “There’s something very happy-making about seeing beautiful, well-behaved dogs.”

But make no mistake: This is serious business for competitive dogdom. There were more than 2,000 dogs in the exhibition hall just outside Philly, and it was possible to shake paws with each one because this is one of three “bench shows” in the United States — with designated spaces backstage where the dogs are displayed when they’re not being judged. It’s a chance to see an astonishing canine variety, from five-pound Yorkies to 200-pound mastiffs. When they’re not in the ring, show dogs are just like any other: Playing, barking, stealing kisses and otherwise being super cute.

Everyone at the National Dog Show is passionate about dogs, which means educating people about the pros and cons of each breed. Purebreds were developed to do specific tasks — hunt, track, herd, guard and the like — except toys dogs, which were primarily pets. Judges look for the ideal version of each breed, and each person has a favorite.

“I always lean toward the Irish setters because their posture and the auburn hair flowing in the breeze looks like the redhead who just walked into the cocktail party,” O’Hurley says. Frei loves Afghans; Carillo is partial to terriers because “they always look like they’re smiling.”



Dana Maines interacts with Squish, an American Staffordshire terrier, at the National Dog Show. (Mark Makela/for The Washington Post)



Ghost, a Norwegian buhund, relaxes after his appearance in the ring. (Mark Makela/for The Washington Post)

How to choose? The toy group pranced into the ring to the “Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy.” (And yes, later they played “Who Let the Dogs Out?” because of course they did.) There were dogs that looked like lions, dogs that looked like mops, dogs that looked like throw pillows and one that looked like a moving carwash.

The champions are unfazed by the lights, the music, the crowds. They stand still while the judge examines their body, then promenade in the ring. The

power of the sassy butt wiggle cannot be denied. It's a beauty contest *and* a personality contest.

“He loves to show,” says Fay Adcox, owner of Ghost, a 4-year-old Norwegian buhund. “He has attitude. You tell him he’s a good boy, and he just struts his stuff.”

Through the magic of television, seven hours are edited down to two: highlights from each group, best in show and behind-the-scenes features. Not every breed makes the broadcast, but each one is posted online.

Another thing on full display in the ring but discreetly edited for family television: doggy manhood. Show dogs cannot be neutered or spayed and must have all their, er, parts intact. The American Kennel Club requires that all males have two testicles, and judges check for fakes. (In Europe, one is enough, but American dogs must have two. U.S.A.!)

But the real trick is keeping the results under wraps — no headlines, tweets or photos of the winner. Reporters and photographers are embargoed until the broadcast ends, and there’s been no major breach for 17 years.

“There is a wave of goodwill that cascades over the dog media and the traditional media,” says Steve Griffith, the show’s public relations director. Hundreds of people, including the general public at the show, are in on the secret because it’s fun and good for the dog world. “Our objective is to make it a wonderful surprise on Thanksgiving Day.”



Sarah Rivkin with Amber, a 1-year-old standard poodle, at the National Dog Show. (Mark Makela/for The Washington Post)



Announcers John O'Hurley and David Frei pose with Justin Smithey and his best-in-show champion Whiskey, a 3-year-old whippet. (Mark Makela/for The Washington Post)

After judging 192 breeds this year, the contest for best in show came down to seven group winners: Bella, a Pembroke Welsh corgi representing the herding group; Billy, a Lhasa apso from the non-sporting group; Ducky, a Chesapeake Bay retriever from the sporting group; King, the wire fox terrier from the terrier group; Bogie, a King Charles Cavalier spaniel from the toy group; Irupe, a Doberman pinscher from the working group; and Whiskey, representing the hound group.

The runner-up was the Doberman, then the arena went silent. “Pick my dog!” a little girl shouted from the audience. Best in show: The judge pointed to the whippet, which caused audible gasps from the crowd.

Whiskey, it should be said, is a beautiful dog. And a very good boy.

“He’s a typical whippet in personality — laid-back, enjoyable, clean, easy to house-train, quiet — and that’s what makes him a lovely dog,” says owner Justin Smithey, who’s been showing the breed for two decades. “He’s a great show dog because he’s not intimidated by a setting like this.”

Actually, the 3-year-old dog is already an old pro on the show circuit: Whiskey is the top hound in the country, and this was his 20th best in show. The grand prize: \$1,500, a big ribbon and Purina nibbles served on a silver platter.

Both Frei and O'Hurley, who always try to second-guess the judges, were surprised. "It wasn't even my second pick," O'Hurley says. "The wire-haired terrier seemed a little sluggish. It was his to lose, and I think he lost it."

In the end, does it matter who wins? To the breeders and handlers, of course. To the rest of us, and maybe even the show dogs themselves, probably not. Every dog is a winner in its owner's eyes.

"I read somewhere that when you die and go to heaven, every dog you've ever loved will run to greet you," Carillo says. "On a day like Thanksgiving, you really can be thankful for what they give to your life."