

Scottie Character and Sparring

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“NO JUDGE SHOULD PUT TO WINNERS OR BEST OF BREED ANY SCOTTISH TERRIER NOT SHOWING REAL TERRIER CHARACTER IN THE RING” *A key phrase from our standard.*

This is a key phrase from our standard. It should be pretty self-explanatory -but is it? I am approached many times to explain or clarify this and it always leads to discussion of “Sparring.” Those who have grown up with Scotties know that sparring is just one way to show Terrier character in the ring. However I seem to hear that there needs to be better education on how to spar, when to do it and is it the only way to show that character.

What is sparring? Webster’s says, “to gesture without landing a blow...” I love this description. When I started it was commonplace to see terriers sparred. Dogs were brought out to face off and display their alert attitude. Judges brought 2 dogs but rarely more than 3 center ring. Tails would become rigid, ears erect and occasionally a quivery lip would show a hint of tooth. Never contact. Not to say that occasionally a tuft of beard might end up in the air. But that was greatly discouraged. The best dogs never left the ground. They just drew a line in the grass and said I dare you, simply a glorious stare down.

Sadly I hear stories of bad sparring. Concerns are how a judge allows it, how an exhibitor controls their dog and what spectators see in the ring. Perhaps some helpful advice is in order since I would hate to see this practice disappear.

As an exhibitor always have your dog in control in the ring. Train your terrier not fly into the air in a rage but rather stand its ground. Know the distance you can approach another terrier before your dog reacts. Ring awareness of your surroundings, fellow exhibitors and their dogs is a must. When asked to spar, listen to directions. If none, take the lead and control the situation by how close you allow your dog to get. All the judge needs to see is your dog’s positive attitude. If asked to get closer stay your ground.

Judges you are in control of your ring. If you choose to spar terriers then make sure you know how. If not, consider whether or not you should do it. Go to people you respect in breeds that spar. Get feedback on what is correct and/or safe. Watch it being done before you give it a go. My general rule of thumb is never spar more than 2 dogs. Bring them center ring with lots of space around. State clearly that you just want them to look and you do not want contact or see them leave the ground. If attitude is there it will be displayed immediately. If it is not, do not push the issue. If the exhibitors start to get too close tell them to back away. Never allow the dogs to connect. We do not want to see dogs injured and we need to think how it would appear to spectators. We do not want any thought that you are encouraging dog fighting. That will only do all of us and our sport a disservice. Once you see that bristly attitude dismiss the dogs back into position. Please never spar a puppy with an adult. It is too great a risk for a young temperament.

As for “real terrier character” sparring is not the only test. Look for an attitude of confidence, a firm stance for examination, a head and tails up movement in a group going around or a solo down and back. It is a dog that comes back to a judge with an air of superiority that says look at me.

Ultimately we all have to choose our way to evaluate this. Sparring is simply one option and when done poorly the repercussions are not worth the risk. However correctly managed it is a beautiful sight. Two specimens at the end of their leads standing their ground telling each other and the world this is their turf and no one else’s.