

The Road to Westminster

(A Junior Handler's Tale)

by Judy Harwood

Our journey to Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show, the premier event in dog showing in the United States, has several beginnings. In 1968, my family bought our first purebred dog, a Samoyed. Together we learned about dog shows from the ground up, starting with sanctioned matches and inching our way up to point shows and better bred dogs. Along the way our two daughters became successful Junior Handlers of our Samoyeds and Papillons. The youngest, Annebly, had a spectacular success at age twelve when she won Best Junior Handler at the Hochelaga Kennel Club's Million Dollar Show in Montreal!

As so many families do, we all got 'out' of dogs, but Annebly re-entered the dog show world. Today she shows Smooth Fox Terriers, and her two daughters follow her. In Fall 2003, Annebly told family members that her daughter, Maddie, might qualify to go to Westminster with their Smooth Fox Terrier, Pete. Maddie had racked up six Best Junior wins in the Open class since turning fourteen in February. If she won twice more, for a total of eight wins, she would be eligible to compete in Madison Square Garden at the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show.

Keeping the February 9-10 dates cleared on our calendars, we waited anxiously to learn about the two remaining hurdles. By Christmas, when we were all together in Florida, we knew that Maddie's participation with her dog, Pete, at Westminster was a certainty. Plane reservations, hotel bookings and the hunt for warm clothes followed in short order. As the proud grandmother, I was determined to video tape Maddie and Pete at the Garden.

Shortly before the trip I was disappointed to learn I would arrive too late to videotape Maddie's first round of competition. Maddie was scheduled for one of the two groups of Juniors being judged on Monday. The winners from these two groups and the remaining two groups would make up the eight finalists for Tuesday night's competition. In all, 139 Juniors would be competing for the title of Best Junior Handler. I could only hope that Maddie would make it to the finals.

Throughout the flight from Tampa to New York City, I fretted. What if Maddie doesn't make it past Monday? Will Annebly decide to leave early Tuesday in order to get the girls back in school? I didn't have any backup plans to fill a cold day in an unfamiliar city.

After deplaning, it was dark and I abandoned my plans to catch a shut-

tle to the Martinique Hotel in favor of a taxi. In the lobby of the hotel, Annebly walked toward me with half a smile. "Maddie made the cut but Pete's sick. I don't know if she can show him tomorrow. I'm going to see if she can switch dogs and show Curt, my breed entry."

"What's wrong with him? Is Maddie upset?"

"She's still up in the stratosphere from her win. Her dad took her and her friend, Taylor, out for a celebration dinner. We'll see how she is feeling when she gets back to the hotel."

Over dinner, in an Irish pub between the hotel and the Garden, Annebly related how she had held her breath as the judge selected the first Junior handler from Maddie's group and then pulled out Maddie for the second finalist. She compared the thrill she felt to winning the National Speciality with her dog, Mick. "You know, Maddie's one of the youngest in the competition. She only turned fourteen in February." Of course, I knew her birth date, but I hadn't recognized that many competing against her were four years more experienced.

"Tomorrow, we will go watch the breed judging and then find the superintendent to request the switch in dogs," Annebly said.

After dinner, I accompanied Annebly back to the hotel room she shared with Maddie, Taylor and Pete.

"Congratulations," I said, hugging my granddaughter as she introduced me to Taylor. "How does it feel to be a finalist?" I asked, avoiding the obvious questions about Pete. "It's really overwhelming," Maddie said. "But I don't want to show tomorrow if I can't take Pete in the ring." "Maybe he'll be better tomorrow." I consoled Maddie as I said good night and adjourned to my room. But he wasn't.

I learned that when I called

Annebly's room the next morning to formulate a game plan for the first half of the day. She was e-mailing a colleague who might know what was wrong with Pete. My job was to get a ticket for the Garden for me. An hour later, ticket in my purse and refreshed from my walk in 39 degree sunshine, I knocked on Annebly's door, hoping for the best.

Doom and gloom! Pete lay behind Maddie's chair with his head on the floor as she played games on the laptop, trying to distract herself from the obvious fact that her dog didn't feel good. Normally, he would have investigated me as a newcomer and been alert to all the city noises filtering into the room. Annebly snapped at the girls to pick up their clothes, shoes and cosmetics. Pete followed Maddie around the room as she shuffled her belongings from one spot to another. His tail hung down like a wet noodle. I had never seen a Smooth Fox Terrier with such a limp appendage!

"Maybe Maddie can show Pete like that," I suggested, knowing how important the teamwork between handler and dog was to a winning performance.

Annebly cut that possibility short, "You can't show a Smooth with its tail down."

Off we went to the Garden with heavy hearts. We found a spot to sit with Annebly's friend whose English Foxhound was being shown by Andrew (Curt's handler, also). Lynne advised Annebly to consult with the show officials as soon as possible. As we threaded our way around the circumference of the Garden floor to the opposite side of the arena, Maddie and I became separated from Annebly. It felt like the 2600 plus dogs entered in the show and their entourages were all milling around us. When we stopped to ask for the location of the superintendent's office, my daughter disappeared into the throng.

Maddie and I made our way down a hallway just off the show area to a place of relative calm. Maddie confidently outlined her predicament to the official in the office and requested that she be allowed to substitute Curt for Pete. The lady said, "Oh my, we've never had that happen before. We'll have to get a ruling on that. Come back in thirty minutes and I'll have an answer for you."

We headed for the grooming area, a sort of back stage for the show. Grooming tables were crammed around exercise pens. People and dogs were trying their best to stay out of each other's way. By the time Maddie found her mother, it was time to get the verdict. Before Taylor and I cleared the Garden on our way back to the hotel, Annebly was on the cell phone with the bad news that the dogs couldn't be switched. Annebly asked that I take Taylor and do something with her because Maddie was very upset and needed time to calm down. "We're on our way back to the hotel," she said. "Maddie wants to withdraw from the competition." I suggested to Taylor that we go to Macy's, just down the block from the hotel. In a crunch one could always take a teen shopping. Stopping by

the hotel to drop off my camera before heading for the department store, we found Maddie waiting in the lobby for us. She couldn't pass up a shopping trip.

Taylor was amazingly supportive of Maddie as she filled the role of personal shopping assistant. Several times, I heard her say, "I am so proud of you." Gradually the tension eased out of Maddie's shoulders. Two and one-half hours slipped by as skirts, tops and blazers were scrutinized, tried on and rejected. Maddie commented several times that she was very picky. Finally, she settled on a black and white outfit that would look stunning with her black and white dog-if he was well enough to go in the ring.

Maddie and Taylor planned to revisit the Garden where the third and fourth groups of thirty-six Juniors were competing for the right to be among the select eight finalists who would go head to head that evening. First we had to drop the loot off at the hotel room.

We hesitated at the door, not knowing what to expect. Finally, Taylor slid her key in the slot. Surprise, surprise! Pete was bouncing around the room, his old self-tail

up, inquisitive look in his eyes and cocky body language. Maddie went down on her knees and gave him a big hug before happily going off to watch her competition.

A half hour before the televised group judging began, eight junior handlers and their dogs filed onto the green carpet of Westminster. To me, they all appeared flawless in the presentation of their dogs to the judge. Maddie was polished, poised and skillful. I couldn't tell if she was nervous, but I certainly was. My heart pounded so hard the video camera shook. Pete was in his element, strutting to the applause of the crowd-head up and tail at attention. Finally, the judge pointed to her winners. Maddie and Pete were not in the chosen four but they looked like winners during the final parade around the ring. My heart filled with undiluted pride for Maddie's accomplishment and her grace under pressure.

Hotel: \$300, airfare: \$170, food: \$150, Madison Square Garden ticket: \$36, watching my granddaughter compete: priceless!

*****Wanted*****

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