



BEST IN SHOW

Kathleen Morrison, pictured above, learned that veterinary medicine and show dog handling have many parallels.



MEET THE AUTHOR

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A Complicated Career Choice

The worlds of veterinary medicine and dog shows may seem vastly different, but the heart of each is the same—a love of animals. The kind of love that makes veterinary staff work crazy hours and breeders sleep in the whelping box is a special kind of love for the animals in our lives. There are many members of the dog show community who are involved in veterinary medicine at some level, whether as a veterinarian, veterinary nurse, or other veterinary team member. Roles can range from registered professional handlers to AKC licensed judges. There are definite parallels between a veterinary nurse and an AKC registered handler, who is a member of the Registered Handler Program (RHP).

Kathleen is a Massachusetts native who has recently transplanted to Long Island, New York. She is an alumna and former faculty member of the Mount Ida College Veterinary Technician Program in Newton, Massachusetts (now the University of Massachusetts Veterinary Technology Program), where she was a diagnostic imaging instructor. Reproductive medicine is a passion of Kathleen's, but imaging has always been her "home" in veterinary medicine. Currently, she works at the Veterinary Medical Center of Long Island in the neurology department. Kathleen enjoys spending time with her partner, Meghann, and their 5 show dogs, traveling around the Northeast to various dog shows.

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The relationship between the veterinary community and those that breed dogs for certain traits—purebred dogs—is complicated. I won't pretend that it doesn't sometimes get ugly. As veterinary professionals, we sometimes tend to lump all "breeders" into one category—those who care only about the breed's desired physical traits at the expense of the animal's health. The reverse side? There are breeders who say veterinarians are only in it to fleece the owners. Both beliefs are blanket statements and are certainly not true of everyone involved in either profession. I would be remiss to not mention this ongoing debate, but delving into these 2 sides is not the point of this article. I will add only that both communities have a lot to offer each other and I would love to see them work in harmony.

FOR ME, IT STARTED WITH A POOPER SCOOPER

My involvement in the dog show community is one of the reasons I am in veterinary medicine (in addition to being a science nerd who loves animals). Since the age of 11, I was "raised" in the dog show world and I have always felt grateful for this. It provided me with discipline, structure, confidence, good sportsmanship, and a safe, accepting environment.

Starting at the bottom in the dog world is not dissimilar from starting at the bottom in the veterinary world; it all starts with a pooper scooper. I was taught to care for the basic needs of these wonderful animals: cleaning and disinfecting their environment, feeding them properly, exercising them appropriately for their age and desired body condition, grooming them (including ear cleaning and nail trims) for comfort and for show. These foundational skills are just as important in the veterinary world as they are the dog show world and gave me a good base when I started veterinary nursing school.

In high school, I got a job that came naturally to me by that point—kennel attendant. The boarding kennel where I worked was attached to a veterinary hospital and the veterinarians would take care of any needed "health checks" for the sick or injured pets at the kennel. After bringing several pets over that I had signed up for health checks, I became more interested in veterinary medicine. Eventually, I was encouraged by one of the staff veterinarians to explore a career in veterinary medicine. He had noticed that since I had begun working at the kennel, I had detected problems that were subtle and often missed by others. This

conversation, as well as my positive experience in the dog show world, led me to choose veterinary nursing as a career. It's a decision that I have never regretted.

THE DOG SHOW LIFE

Professional dog show handlers are hired by dog owners and/or breeders to exhibit their dogs at shows. Most of the time, the dogs live with the handlers, which means they are responsible for the care of the dogs during that time. Dog shows are held mainly on weekends, but a handler's work goes far beyond those few minutes in the ring. Handlers spend their weekdays caring for their charges in many aspects. During the week, dogs are brushed, bathed, and trimmed regularly, meticulously fed, and exercised in groups and individually. This is because the body condition of a show dog is of prime importance, with much training of the dogs occurring in one-on-one sessions with the handlers.

Handlers must also provide a proper environment for their dogs—inside and outside, as well as safe transportation (AKC RHP handlers must undergo inspection of their animal housing and transportation vehicles on a yearly basis.) Most handlers are also responsible for taking these dogs for veterinary visits for things such as health testing, health certificates, routine wellness, and anything emergent. A handler's work is never done; it is a 24/7 job. A prominent professional handler once said, "You either love it or hate it [dog shows]. There is no in between. This is more than an avocation or an occupation—it is a lifestyle." He is absolutely right. Showing dogs elevates the canine-human bond to a new level. It is a strong, beautiful bond to form with a canine friend and it involves a special kind of teamwork.

I have spent 26 years showing dogs and 17 years as a veterinary nurse. Over the years, I have found that showing dogs has made me a better veterinary nurse. The most important thing that I learned all those years ago was how to understand dog "language." Canine body language is not always easy to understand, especially in a short time span. Showing dogs and training them have taught me how to read a dog quite well. Whether you are training a dog for basic obedience or to be shown at Westminster, you need to be able to "get inside their head"—i.e., you need to learn what makes them tick. This applies to veterinary medicine as well. It's not the same teamwork as a handler and her charge, but there is still a level of trust that must be gained to treat patients easily. **TVN**