

The truth about cats at the Westminster dog show

By **Karin Brulliard** February 6 at 10:03 AM

For fans of the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, the headlines might have been alarming. “The Westminster dog show is adding cats this year,” Newsweek informed the world last week. “Cats crash Westminster dog show,” readers of the Denver Post learned.

“We are so far gone, so consumed by political correctness, that unwanted and potentially dangerous outsiders are poised to put one of our most cherished institutions at risk,” a Chicago Tribune columnist wrote. He called for a ban on feline entry, “until we can figure this thing out.”

But while this was not exactly fake news, it was also not exactly true. Cats are not about to tread on show dogs’ sovereign terrain or usurp their hold on prime-time television pageantry (kitties already rule the Internet, after all). Westminster is still a dog-only show — for now.

What is true: Cats will, for the first time in several years, be on display at a joint Westminster-American Kennel Club event on Feb. 11, two days before the actual canine competition begins. It’s called “Meet the breeds,” an occasion where members of the public can ogle and learn about many dozens of dog breeds, each with its own booth.

This year, out of the kindness of their canine-loving hearts, and because of a bit of public pressure, the American Kennel Club (AKC) decided to bring back cats, giving forty breeds of felines their own booths.

“We have heard people’s demands for the cats. And they returned,” said Brandi Hunter, an AKC spokeswoman who, without a hint of resentment in her voice, added, “Cats are pets, too.”

But the cats on display are “not just everyday regular felines,” she noted. They are designer breeds such as Maine Coons and toygers, Nebelungs and Bengals — one of which stole the limelight from three new dog breeds introduced at a Westminster news conference last week.

What also sets these cats apart from the one that sleeps on your head at home is that some compete in agility contests, one of which will be featured at the “Meet the breeds” event.

Perhaps you have seen dog agility competitions: Pooches race through obstacle courses, guided by a handler who cannot touch them nor entice them with treats, toys or any incentive for their efforts.

Cats do that, too? Not exactly.

Anthony Hutcherson, the owner of the Bengal that generated all the cats-at-Westminster headlines last week — a mini-leopard named Jungletrax Abiding Ovation — said the basic idea is the same: get the cat to complete an obstacle course quickly and flawlessly. But these being cats, they need a good reason for doing it. So, feline agility allows — and from the cat's perspective, requires — handlers to lure the animal through the course with a toy on a string.

Basically, the cat thinks it's hunting, rather than doing its owner's bidding, Hutcherson said. His cats prefer toys that look like mice, he said, and they are pretty good at the balance beams and hoops. Slaloms and tunnels, not so much. In general, some cats are more cooperative on agility courses than others, he said.

"I don't know if it's temperament. Sometimes I think it's intelligence," said Hutcherson, of Port Tobacco, Md, who's on the board of the International Cat Association, or TICA. "Not that the smartest cats are the ones that are best at agility. Sometimes I think it's the opposite."

It's more about prey drive, he said. "Some cats, if they see something that looks like a mouse or bird, they're going for it 100 percent," he said. Others "are well fed and have everything they want."

Agility competitions are growing in popularity at cat shows, said Hutcherson, one of whose kitties — a Bengal named Traipse Furiosa Impresaria — won the course at a recent show in San Diego, netting \$75. But Hutcherson emphasized that not only pedigreed cats such as his Bengals can be prizewinners. Many cat shows now have a category for housecats, and the "Meet the breeds" event in New York this weekend will also have two household cat booths.

Agility competitions are always open to all, he said. All the cats who deign to participate, that is.

"It's all about how good you are, not where you come from," Hutcherson said.

Meet the cats of Westminster

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