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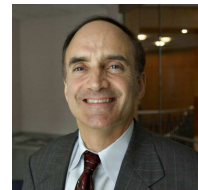
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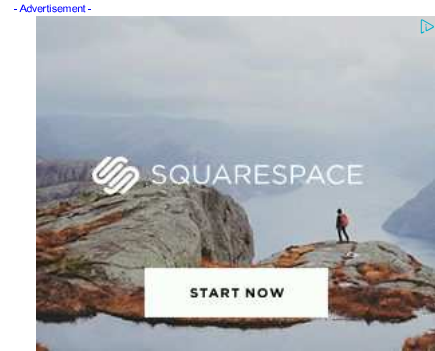
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2013 Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show
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Olympics solved judging scandal by panel dropping high and low

By Robert Weiner and Ben Lasky

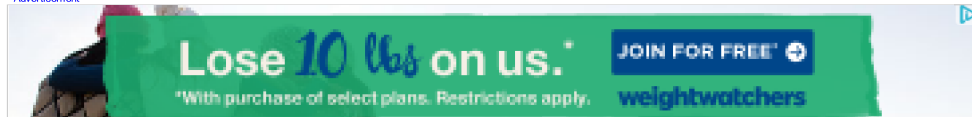
Next month (February 15-16), labs, boxers, collies, beagles, poodles, big dogs and lapdogs will again rule the land at Madison Square Garden. For most who watch on television, the Westminster Dog Show is a time to tune in to see a version of the cuddly dog lying next to them. New York City's Economic Development Corporation says that the "City's dog lovers anxiously await the crowning of this year's Best in Show." NYCEDC reports there are 600,000 pet dogs in the City.

For breeders and handlers, winning the most prestigious dog show in the world means a tremendous deal. It's big business--the Garden makes the Knicks schedule around it. According to the Westminster Kennel Club, Americans spend about \$330 million annually competing in dog shows. The club's communications director said owners preparing dogs to compete spend "upwards of six figures annually."

Why is only one person -- one judge -- making the final decision on who is Best in Show, and Best of Breed and Best of Group to get to the final "show"? The first paragraph of the "Dog Shows 101" page of the Westminster Kennel Club's website concedes the sport's "subjective basis: one judge, applying his or her interpretation of the standard, giving his or her opinion of the best dog on that particular day."

There is no shortage of available judges. Nationwide there are more than 3,000 dog show judges. There is also no shortage of money to pay for them. Though it is difficult to track its finances, the Westminster show has awarded over a million dollars in grants and scholarships.

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There is a lot at stake, a lifetime reputation for the trainers, owners, and dogs themselves starting with small dog shows to the big ones culminating in Westminster, the biggest of all. The one-judge procedure makes and breaks a doggie lifetime.

The Olympics couldn't avoid bias and corruption with judges for skating--and changed the process. Westminster should look at the Olympic model, based on the scandal whose source was a single judge.

At the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics, Russian figure skating pair Elena Berezhnaya and Anton Sikharulidze "won" gold. Television announcers and those watching at home could not believe the judges' decisions. We were there in the same section with Mitt Romney, and former Gold Medalist Scott Hamilton told us as we walked out, "Watch the French judge." He could tell.

When confronted at her hotel by an Olympics official following the event, French judge Marie-Renne Le Gougne admitted that she was pressured by the head of the French skating organization to vote for the Russian pair to win. Following the investigation, the silver medalists were upgraded to gold. As a result of the scandal, the International Skating Union completely overhauled the figure skating scoring. Now, the highest and lowest scores are discarded, and the score is the average of the remaining seven votes. No single judge can throw the results.

The dog show kingdom should learn from the Olympic panels with the high and low scores discarded. In addition, Olympics horse "dressage" (the dancing and movements competition), also subjectively decided, has seven judges around the arena to assure no one judge dominates.

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Even if there is no corruption, even if it's just a case of a judge deciding "my favorite dog" because of cuddles and licks at home from his or hers, a single judge making all decisions to decide Best in Show is wrong and, according to Westminster's own website, "subjective." It's time to make sure the Yummy given to the Westminster Dog Show winner is earned.

Weiner and Lasky are dog lovers and owners (Weiner a boxer, Lasky a pug). Weiner is former spokesman for the White House National Drug Policy Office and the House Government Operations Committee, was legislative assistant to Congressman Ed Koch and senior aide to Charles Rangel, Claude Pepper, John Conyers, and Sen. Ted Kennedy. He was a spokesman at the Sydney and Salt Lake City Olympics. Lasky is senior policy analyst at Robert Weiner Associates and Solutions for Change.

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