

Editorializing...

Is It Time to Say Goodbye to Byes in the USDAA Grand Prix?



By Ann Croft

During the early years of the USDAA Grand Prix of Dog Agility (GPDA), exhibitors competed at regional events to qualify for the tournament's national championships. To earn the chance to compete for the title of GPDA National Champion at the nationals, you had to advance through two rounds of competition (quarterfinals and semifinals) to reach the third and final round. Over the years the format of the tournament has changed to encourage more participation by foreign competitors and the event is now called the GPDA World Championships. Exhibitors compete at local events to earn qualifying scores for entry into the quarterfinals of the world championships, but now they can also compete at Regional Championships where they can earn the right to bypass the quarterfinal round at the world championships, or even the quarterfinal *and* semifinal rounds: Competitors who place in the top 50% at a regional championship earn a bye into the semifinals at the world championships, and the winner in each height at a regional championship earns a bye into the final round of the world championships to compete for the title of GPDA World Champion.

The final round at the world championships remains a highly competitive and exciting event, and those competing have earned the right to be there and are to be applauded for their hard work and dedication to the sport and to their dogs. This editorial is *not* a criticism of the competitors who earn byes at a regional championship. It is a statistical analysis to look at whether having a bye into the finals versus advancing through the tournament ladder at the world championships impacts a competitor's odds of winning the championship or earning a high placement.

Over the years I have kept track of the top placements in the GPDA World Championships and have noted whether those with high placements had a bye into

the finals. In the 2006 finals, 27 out of the 66 handlers competing, or 41%, had byes into the finals. Out of those who placed 1st through 3rd in the four height divisions, 10 of the top 12 teams, or 83%, had byes into the finals—twice the percentage going into the finals. All four winners, or 100%, had byes into the finals—two-and-a-half times the percentage going into the finals.

Was 2006 a fluke? In 2005, three out of the four winners had byes into the finals; in 2004, one out of the four winners had a bye into the finals; and in 2003, four out of the four winners had byes. That's a combined total of 12 out of 16 winners over the four-year period. Those with byes into the finals comprised only 41% of all competitors in the finals, yet totaled 75% of the winners. Of the 48 top placements (1st through 3rd place in four height divisions) over the four years, 29 were earned by those with byes, or 60%.

Are the dogs with byes into the finals truly significantly faster and more accurate than the teams who make it to the finals through the tournament ladder? Some comparison is possible because the dogs with byes into the finals run in the semifinals round at the championships just to determine their seeding or running order in the finals. Looking at the 2006 semifinals round, the dogs that advanced to the finals through the tournament ladder were separated by 4 seconds in the 12" division (6 dogs moved on to the finals), 3.4 seconds in the 16" division (9 dogs moved on), 1.5 seconds in the 22" division (16 dogs moved on), and 1.3 seconds in the 26" division (10 dogs moved on). Of the 27 teams who had byes into the finals, only five, or 18.5%, earned a score in the semifinals that would have allowed them to advance to the final round if the run counted for more than seeding. Two of these five teams were from the 12" division, one from the 16", two from the 22", and none from the 26" division.

To have a bye into the final round clearly seems an advantage beyond just the guaranteed opportunity to compete. While the entry at the regional championships does vary a bit in size from location to location, the number of dogs the regional winner must defeat to earn a bye is probably comparable to the number of dogs a competitor must defeat to earn a spot into the finals through the tournament ladder at the world championships. I think that the advantage of having a bye into the finals is conferred by the freedom from worry about advancing through two rounds of do-or-die competition to get into the finals, and the fact that the guaranteed finalist may use the semifinal round for training and preparing for the final round. In fact, a competitor with a bye into the finals can even elect to forego the semifinals round and rest himself and his dog instead. The only potential disadvantage to the latter decision is that the competitor will have to run early in the order in the finals.

Some exhibitors would like to impose a geographic limitation on who can compete at each regional championship. Given the advantage conferred by having a bye into the finals, I would not like to see this restriction. I prefer to continue in the spirit of open competition. Further, while some exhibitors travel a

long way for regional championships, most regional winners do come from the region. Instead, I would like to see a return to a more traditional format with a minimum of two rounds where *everyone* must participate to be crowned a GPDA champion. As it stands, the only round where all GPDA finalists have to face each other is the final round of competition, and their route to the final round may be quite different in terms of the challenges faced and overcome. I cannot think of another major national or world championship sporting event—tennis, basketball, baseball, figure skating, or any of the Olympic sports—where competitors do not compete head-to-head to with others, either through heats or seeded ladders, to reach the final championship round.

Requiring everyone to advance to the finals through the tournament ladder at the world championships would put everyone on equal footing in the finals. The winners and top placers would be drawn from all those competing in the finals, rather than the statistical bias currently observed toward those who have earned a bye into the finals through the regional format.

Ann Croft

Ann lives in San Diego, California with her two Boston Terriers, Chance and Prix, and four Border Collies, Caper, Trigger, Flurry, and Kit. Her Bostons, Mystic (1992-2004) and Chance, achieved many agility firsts for their breed. Chance, Caper, and Trigger are all double agility champions, MACH and ADCH, and have all been AKC Nationals finalists with Trigger placing second overall in 2003. Trigger and her teammates won the 2004 DAM National Team Championship. Ann now teaches full time at her training center, Paws on the Wind Dog Sports, and is also an AKC and USDAA judge. Learn more at www.pawsonthewind.com.

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