

## CHIHUAHUAS **SPARRING** Part One

“Let them look at each other.” If you handle a Chihuahua in the conformation ring, you will be hearing this phrase or a variation of it more and more often in the future. In the Chihuahua Club of America breed seminars, judges are being encouraged to use *sparring* as a tool to assess temperament in the breed. This is not a new phenomenon, but goes back to the early days of the breed.

I first witnessed sparring more years ago than I care to admit. I was watching a Terrier Group when the judge dismissed all but six dogs; he then brought these dogs to the center of the ring and said, “Let them look at each other.” What followed was 30 to 45 seconds of pure delight for observers. The dogs posed in a circle facing one another, some bouncing into the air only to hit the ground in another pose, all displaying dominance stances and trying to “out dog” each other.

I was very impressed by this display and later asked a professional handler friend about the practice, which I assumed was peculiar to the terrier ring. To my surprise, he said some “old-time” judges sparred Chihuahuas, considering them to be a small terrier. My friend added that some judges still believed in sparring them, and I made it a goal to look for those judges. Every year I would find one or two, until this past year when I encountered five who sparred one or more classes.

For those of you who are not familiar with the practice, a short explanation of sparring is “bringing the dogs together to interact, without real contact.” Most judges spar only dogs who they feel have the proper temperament for the ritual. This is where “without real contact” becomes very important. If you are asked to spar your dog, be very respectful of your fellow handlers and control your dog in a manner that avoids physical contact with other dogs or handlers. For a superbly written description of sparring, read pages 64 and 65 of *The Atlas of Dog Breeds of the World*, by Bonnie Wilcox, DVM, and Chris Walkowicz.

In the last 20 years, the Chihuahua as a breed has made great strides in both the group and Best in Show rings. Consequently, judges are expecting much more of our dogs. They want to see the standard presented in the flesh. As breeders and handlers, we must learn to present the best possible picture of our breed in the ring. One of the tools to do this is sparring – it not only gives insight into temperament but, when done properly, shows the beauty of the little dogs’ structure and the fearlessness so prized in the breed.

How do we train our dogs to spar? Many of you who show the Chihuahuas have been sparring your dogs without realizing it. Whenever two dogs show interest in one another and begin to pose and posture, that is sparring. This behavior is more an inherent factor, not to be “trained” but channeled and brought forth in the show ring. In the next column I will discuss what judges are looking for when dogs are sparred. – *Bruce E. Shirky, 11489 S foster Rd, San Antonio, TX 78223; bshirky@texas.net*