

The Matter of the Match

By Judith LeRoy

They call us dogs dumb animals?? Next to some humans I know, my father's Einstein.

Take, for example, the humans I live with. They are undeniably lovable, sweet, caring, and usually dependable. But in the commonsense department? Well, they're maybe a brick short of a load. I try to take care of them and keep them out of trouble, but it's not always easy. Their foibles were evident in The Matter of The Match.

Whoever knew how drastically that day would change my life.

I was lying on my back with the breeze from the ceiling fan ruffling my tummy feathers. My humans think the pose is cute and that I do it just to amuse them. Ridiculous. The only reason a sophisticated, worldly 18-month-old Beardie boy assumes an undignified position like this is to keep his belly cool. Any idiot knows that.

Anyway, there I was, dozing in the breeze when She Who Feeds Me, with great enthusiasm, exclaimed to He Who Walks Me, "Darling! Look here in the paper! People are supposed to bring their dogs to the park tomorrow for a Match!"

Take a dog to the park for a match? That sounded pretty silly to me. A dog can get a match right in his own home if he really wants one. Humans sometimes carry them in their pockets, which can be raided. They keep them in kitchen drawers, which can be opened. And sometimes they leave them on the table after they light the candles for a dinner party. But the last matches I ate didn't taste very good—kind of salty and rotten egg-like, and She scolded me and took me to the vet. I don't plan to eat any more matches.

She Who Feeds Me continued, "It says here that purebred dogs are invited to compete for ribbons. Wouldn't it be fun? Shag's got a pedigree from that Kennel Club thing in New York—wouldn't that make him eligible?"

He Who Walks Me was slow to respond because he was reading the sports page and the Red Sox had won a double header the day before. (I'm not sure I'd like to win anything with two heads, much less two tails, but then I'm not human, am I?) Anyway, he finally said, "Sure—Shag's a purebred. Champion lines on both sides of his pedigree—that's what the breeder said. What do they do in a match??" (I might have known that the "Champion" bit in my breeder's sales pitch would have impressed him. It suggests "competition," and sports' enthusiasts seem to relish any competitive activity.)

"I don't know," she said. "The paper says that you register the dogs at 8 a.m. and judging begins at 9 o'clock. Let's take Shag. He'd like to see the other dogs. And he can wear that great little red coat Mom bought him for Christmas that says, 'Shaggy Bear' on it."

Oh no, not the coat!

I'd promise the great Bitch-Goddess on High that I wouldn't chase the neighbor's cats ever again in my whole life if I please, please, please didn't have to wear the coat to the match. It itches, it slips down over my butt, and even the squirrels laughed the last time I had to wear it.

He Who Walks Me, getting interested, said, "Sure, we can take him. Remember that lady in the park last week who told us he looked good enough to be a show dog? Why not give it a try?"

Oh, oh, that fiasco. That very loud, perfumed fat lady with the stupid yapping dog she called a Bitchin' Frizzy. I remembered her. She kept sneezing and her dog kept trying to bite my ankles. I knew she was nothing but trouble.

Still, I reminded myself, I need to be more generous. I have a pretty good life. Lying on the top step of the swimming pool when it's hot. Romping with He Who Walks Me in the park when it's cool. Rolling in the grass at Grandpop's back pasture almost every weekend. Chewing greasy bones in the back yard. They feed me popcorn and ice cream and let me sleep on the bed at night. I guess I owed them something. If they want a match, I ought to humor them.

As I feared, there's more to this match business than meets the eye. She Who Feeds Me telephoned "My Breeder"—the nice Lady Who Used to Feed Me—who was reportedly "ecstatic" about the idea of me going to a match.

I found myself parked in the people's bathtub—no hose and washtub routine like the day I rolled in horse doo-doo in Grandpop's pasture. This time, they put me in their bathtub and washed me with people shampoo that stunk to high heaven. I wondered what those squirrels would say when they got a whiff of this junk?

Then she put me on the kitchen table—I place I was told dogs never should be—and she started brushing and combing like a woman possessed. I wondered if I'd have any hair left by the time she finished. She's brushed and combed me before, but she'd always leave a tangle or two if I really objected; but on this occasion, I could have screeched my throat sore and howled my lungs out, and she wouldn't even have paused. I knew this match was a dangerous idea.

It was finally time for bed, and she had to put away the instruments of torture. She complained about blisters on her fingers, but I wasn't going to give her any sympathy. I was the one who suffered most, wasn't I? Every nerve ending in my body tingled after her heavy-handed application of that damn slicker brush.

"No breakfast for you today, Shag. Your breeder said not to feed you this morning, so you'd take bait better at the match."

Bait? Bait?? That's what He Who Walks Me throws in the water when we go fishing. Bait? They expected to feed me worms tied to a string at this match? Come on, guys, get real. A dog won't eat worms unless he wants to. Especially underwater. No matter how many breakfasts you make him skip.

And, oh no ... here was the brush again. No breakfast, more grooming, and I had no recourse but to surrender. This was more humoring than any human deserved, and more brushing than any Beardie ever needed!

"Okay, Shag. I think you're about ready." She looked at me, but I couldn't see her through the veil of brown and white hair that hung in my eyes. She recognized the problem. "Oh, dear. The shampoo made your hair so soft it hangs in your eyes, doesn't it?"

She should have noticed the problem earlier. Like when I'd bumped into the sofa twice, the refrigerator once, and the bedroom door three times that morning, all before 7 a.m. I'd need a guide dog for the blind to get around my own house if I had to wear my hair like this. Maybe a nice Golden Retriever who did everything I asked without question or complaint? Too bad he wasn't here already. He could have gone to the damn match instead of me.

"Come here, Shag, we'll put your little barrette with the blue bunnies in your hair so you can see. Oh, how cute! The judge will love it"

Who cared about the judge? If the Rottweiler next door sees me in a bunny barrette, I'm dead meat. What would he have to say about a Beardie in a blue bunny barrette? I groaned at the thought. But she wasn't done, yet.

"And here's your pastel blue matching collar and lead. Oh, you're just adorable."

Oh God, I was embarrassed. I'd have to go out in public like this

"Shag, why are you slinking around like that? Aren't you having a good time here at the match?"

She Who Feeds Me is real dense sometimes. I was slinking around because no other dog at the match smelled like Prell shampoo. No other dogs except those Toy mini-monsters were wearing barrettes, and none—not one other dog—had to wear a pastel blue collar and lead. Even the Basset Hound giggled when we walked past him, and Bassets are usually incredibly polite.

But things could have been worse. The red coat got stuffed in her carryall. He Who Walks Me noticed that no other dog was wearing a coat and, besides, it was 80 degrees in the park. (Sometimes he's a bit more alert to the passing scene than she is, surprising to say. I only wished his masculine pride had kicked in and encouraged him to remove the obscene blue bunny barrette.)

"I just wish I knew what we had to do," she complained to a woman standing next to us.

"Well, you have to stand the dog so the judge can go over him, and then you'll have to gait."

Huh! I could manage a stand, that's why I have four legs. But gait? Gate? That's something she puts up in the kitchen doorway to keep me out of the hors d'oeuvre tray on the

coffee table when she invites guests for dinner. How would I gate, anyhow? Didn't one need thumbs to gate?

Someone called, "Bring the Beardie to Ring 4 ... he'll be judged after the German Shepherds."

We walked over to Ring 4, and I put on my wickedest glare to let those snotty German Shepherds know they'd better not snicker at a Big Bad Beardie in a baby blue bunny barrette.

A sensitive Sheltie was standing at ringside. "Is this your first match?" she inquired quietly.

"How did you ever guess," I mumbled.

"From the looks of things, you're going to have to take charge," she said sympathetically. "Your owner's knees are beginning to quake."

Just what we didn't need. A serious case of the jitters. She Who Feeds Me had suddenly realized that there's more to this match stuff than grabbing a ribbon. He Who Walks Me didn't seem much calmer, judging by the stranglehold he had on my baby blue lead.

I studied the ring. The Corgis were lining up in a ring on the right. I watched with growing interest as the one in front started bucking like a bronco. The one behind him was standing on two legs; the one behind him leaned on his owner, and the last one just gave up and laid down. This was beginning to look a bit more plausible.

The judge, a nice-looking man in a blue jacket, walked into the ring. "Take 'em around," he said.

Now, the Corgis were running around the ring. Then the judge looked at them one by one. He put his hands on their heads and bodies and looked into their mouths to check what he called "their bites." But no one bit him. Wonder if he was disappointed? Then he made them run around the ring individually in a pattern he called "a triangle." First, they ran away from the judge down one side of the ring, then they came back to him down the middle—the judge called it "a diagonal." I studied them pretty intently because I figured it might do me some good. I wished She Who Feeds Me had watched too, instead of standing there all zombie-like and wide-eyed.

Things got sorted in the Corgi ring, and the German Shepherds had just about finished in our ring. He and She were arguing.

"Darling, I'd feel a lot better if you went in the ring with Shag."

"No Dear, this was your idea, after all, and he will feel more comfortable with you."

"But Darling, you are the one who takes him on his walks ... you have more experience with this sort of thing"

"Dear, my knee has bothered me since I stepped in that hole while jogging on Wednesday."

Dear lost, and we walked into the ring together. She was oblivious to all external stimuli—mired in a near-terminal case of stage fright—so I led her to the spot where the Corgis stood. I stood. The judge walked over.

He said to her, “Once around the ring, please.” She Who Feeds Me stared uncomprehendingly at the judge—as if he were speaking Russian. I suspected the judge was telling us to run like the Corgis did, so I started around the circle. I was half-way through before I realized no human was running beside me. I finished the circle with a little flourish and stood next to the woman who had dropped my lead and watched me run without her. Maybe the judge hadn’t noticed her faux pas.

“Very nice,” said the judge. “Easy stride, nice reach and drive. I’ve never seen a dog gait alone before, though.” Apparently, he’d noticed her absence. I suspected he was making small talk, trying to put She Who Feeds Me at ease. He didn’t succeed.

The judge looked down at me. “Teeth,” he said to She Who Feeds Me.

“Yes, he has some,” she said, her parched lips barely moving.

“No, I mean bite,” said the judge, frowning.

“Shag never bites,” she murmured, glassy-eyed.

The judge sighed. This was going to be harder than he’d expected. I’m sure he was wondering why he ever agreed to judge this stupid match when he could have been fishing or mowing his lawn. I thought maybe he’d just give up any notion of checking whether my bite was properly aligned. But he didn’t.

“Just show me his teeth.”

She bent over and pulled my jaws as far apart as they could spread. “See,” she said hopefully. “He has all his teeth.”

The judge and I both rolled our eyes. I’ll bet he was appreciating how much I’ve had to contend with. He stepped back and said, “Give me a triangle, please.” Having watched the Corgis, I knew what he was asking for.

She didn’t have a clue. She murmured apologetically, “I didn’t know I needed to bring one.”

The judge’s mouth gaped. He looked a bit puzzled. Then he said, enunciating very, very clearly, as if he were talking to a two-year-old human, “Just run around the ring. Once.”

She started running around the ring, and I figured I’d better run with her to make sure she didn’t get in any more trouble.

We finished our circle and the judge said, again very slowly, “Stay at the park until Group. Then you can compete with the other herding dog winners. I like this Beardie.” He handed us a ribbon.

Thank God. We got what we came for. She Who Feeds Me could stick the ribbon on the refrigerator door under a magnet like everything else, and we can forget about this match stuff.

Just as we were leaving the ring, a huge cloud rolled in over our heads and rain started pelting down. A loudspeaker bellowed, "Due to inclement weather, the remainder of the match will be canceled. All exhibitors may leave the park."

We dashed toward the car park and jumped in the car as thunder boomed around us.

"Oh, darn!" She Who Feeds Me muttered. "Now we can't go to Group, like the judge said."

I looked at her in amazement. This was the very same woman who couldn't speak coherently in the ring five short minutes ago?

He started the car, and we drove home through the deluge. She sat in the passenger seat, admiring my ribbon.

She Who Feeds Me said to He Who Walks Me, "One of the women at the match said there was going to be a real dog show in town next month. She gave me an entry form. You can get points toward a Championship at those shows. Since you said Shag has 'Champions on both sides of his pedigree,' it seems to me that he deserves a chance to be one, too"

He and Me stared at each other, dumbfounded. "Deserves a chance ...?" Give us a break. Did this mean ...?

"Well, anyway," she blathered on. "The judge said he liked Shag. The woman I was talking to did, too. She said I should call Shag's breeder and ask her how to groom him. You know, what shampoo I should use, and all that. And she told me that something called a conformation class meets in the park every Thursday. It teaches you how to show your dog."

She was talking real fast by now and there was a strange gleam in her eye. "And I'm sending in the entry form for that show next month."

I sank dejectedly to the floorboard from my usual spot on the back seat. See what I get for being a good sport!? I bowed my head and allowed myself to feel miserable—which is hard for a generally cheerful guy like me.

She recognized my palpable gloom. "It'll be fine, Shag. We'll throw away the bunny barrette. Show dogs don't wear them."

I sighed a deep and profound sigh. That was some comfort. Someone needed to work on the baby blue lead and collar, next. That would be another step in the right direction.

But why, despite the promise of these potential blessings, did I have this nagging feeling ... this disturbing inkling ... that growing suspicion that my pool lounging, grass rolling, and greasy-bone chewing habits were about to change?

Why was that?