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ROOM  DEBATE

A Running Commentary on the News

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Every Dog Has His DayBy *THE EDITORS*

Stump, a Sussex spaniel and winner of the top prize at the 133rd Annual Westminster Kennel Club Show. (Photo: Chris McGrath/Getty Images) [Slide Show: Stump Takes Best in Show](#)

Updated, Feb. 12, 3 p.m. | We've updated this discussion with commentary from Ted Kerasote and Cesar Millan.

On Tuesday, a 10-year-old Sussex spaniel (that's 70 in dog years) became [the oldest dog to win Best in Show](#) in the 133-year history of the [Westminster Kennel Club's annual event](#). The dog, known as Stump, was also the first Sussex spaniel to win the prestigious award. As he plodded around the ring, the crowd went wild, clearly delighted by both his breed and [his advanced age](#), not to mention his adorable demeanor.

Can old dogs learn new tricks? Would they want to?

- [Ted Kerasote](#), author
- [Cesar Millan](#), star of "Dog Whisperer"
- [Mark Derr](#), author
- [Jack Volhard](#), dog trainer

In Fact, Stump Isn't Old

***Ted Kerasote** is the author of "Merle's Door: Lessons from a Freethinking Dog," "Out There" and the forthcoming "Why Dogs Die Young and What We Can Do About It."*

Stump, the winner of this year's Westminster Kennel Club dog show, is definitely a good example of what brain research has been revealing: that engaging work keeps both older dogs and humans mentally sharp. But in the rush to extol Stump's geriatric win, almost everyone has overlooked an important fact: He may not be that old of a dog.

The reason that most everyone thinks he's ancient is that our notions about the life spans of dogs have been skewed downward by so many dogs dying young, often of cancer. More and more veterinarians believe that this heartbreaking toll is caused by four factors: inbreeding that passes on genetic defects; environmental pollutants such as automobile exhausts and lawn chemicals that dogs vacuum up as they sniff along; commercial dog foods that are full of oats, soy, corn and wheat, a diet unsuitable for an animal who is still genetically a wolf; and, perhaps most important, the annual vaccinations we give our dogs,

Stump and the winner's cup.
(Photo: Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

which unnecessarily challenge their immune systems. In fact, more and more vets believe that a single puppyhood vaccination of parvovirus, distemper and rabies will provide a dog with lifetime immunity.

Dogs who aren't inbred, who eat home-prepared meals, who exercise often and have few vaccinations tend to live longer than the average life span for their breed. Even large dogs like Labrador retrievers can live healthy lives to 17, and many smaller breeds can live into their early 20s.

These sorts of life spans, which could become more common if we revised how we care for our dogs, cast Stump in a different light. He's really 40-something, not a septuagenarian. Hopefully, his win will help people see that 10-year-old dogs might be considered middle-aged, with a career and active years still ahead of them.

Old Dogs Live In the Present

Cesar Millan is the star of "Dog Whisperer with Cesar Millan" on the National Geographic Channel.

Many people assume that because a dog is older, he is set in his ways. But it's my belief that it's never too late to teach an old dog new things. This is especially true if the senior dog has been with an owner that has fulfilled his needs from the beginning. A bond of trust develops. It becomes easier for the owner to communicate with the dog, because the dog knows what is expected of him.

Age doesn't matter. Dogs always want to go back to balance. They live in the present, they let go of the past, and they don't worry about the future. They react to stimulus presented at that moment. If you change that stimulus, you can change their behavior.

Senior dogs still have a lot to give — just look at Daddy! He has his senior moments. He's losing his vision and his hearing, but he is still able to help younger dogs overcome their issues. It's great to hear that Stump is becoming a role model for older dogs (and people!). Age is just a number. You're never too old to become the best at what you do.

A Class Act to Follow

Mark Derr is the author of "A Dog's History of America: How Our Best Friend Explored, Conquered and Settled a Continent" and "Dog's Best Friend: Annals of the Dog-Human Relationship."

A friend called this morning to ask what I thought of Stump, the Sussex spaniel who waddled off with Best in Show honors at the 2009 Westminster Kennel Club Show, and feeling old and grumpy myself, I muttered, "He's slow and old." Besides, this year's show, gave me a sense of what Yogi Berra called *deja vu* all over again, and that's why Stump was the perfect winner.

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It's not that the old dog had learned a new trick or two to please the judges. Although old dogs are capable of learning and unlearning any number of tricks, the best ones I have known have given up such silly things as tricks as they have become masters of themselves and their share of the cosmos. No longer able to rely on their physical abilities alone, they command by look and expression and by acting only when necessary — but then acting like only old pros can. It's hard to imagine Stump in the field sounding off over game, the way the Sussex spaniels reportedly did, "back in the day." But he proved himself master of the green carpet over the strutting and preening youngsters.

But spokesdog that he will become for gray liberation, Stump's flopping ears proclaim that the Fancy still rules dogdom. His selection comes when Britain's venerable Kennel Club and its foremost show, Crufts, are being roundly criticized for fostering breeding practices detrimental to the health of purebred dogs — criticisms that I among others have brought against the American Kennel Club. There is also concern that the Kennel Club has not done enough to reverse the slow demise of traditional British breeds, the Sussex spaniel among them, as people opt for flashy non-native dogs.

So in pulling an old dog from an historic, vanishing British breed from the pack and declaring him champion, Westminster has sounded its solidarity and declared that the show ain't over yet.

My 10-Year-Old Puppy

Jack Volhard is the author of 12 books, including "Dog Training for Dummies," and conducts training camps for dogs and their owners.

In some cases, that saw about old dogs and tricks might be true. But as a general rule, I don't buy it. Of course, it depends on what we consider old. Stump would be 70 in human years. I wonder how many 70-year-olds consider themselves "old"?

One of the first dogs I trained in a formal setting was my 10-year-old collie, Duke. The dog didn't really need training, but a friend of mine persuaded me that joining an obedience club and training on a regular basis would be fun. He was right. Not only did I enjoy it, but Duke had a ball — he positively blossomed.

Moral of the story: Older dogs can learn new things, though it may take a little longer than with a youngster. But then, what else is new? Teaching them tricks is the best way to keep an old dog's mind active; it's also good exercise. And dogs love to compete. They are just as competitive when they're old, within the limits of their physical ability. Most of all, it keeps them young at heart!

My most treasured experience with an old dog is my Cato, a Landseer Newfoundland. Cato was shown extensively in American Kennel Club obedience trials. At the age of 1, he won the

National Newfoundland Specialty, and many “High in Trials” after that. He was mostly retired at 7, with a Utility title and the first Newfoundland with Obedience Trial Championship points.

Then disaster struck — his sister, Cassandra, unexpectedly died at the age of 8. Cato went into a deep depression. We did not know what to do. The only thing we knew was that he loved competition, so at 8 years old we started all over — in Canada.

At age 10, Cato completed his Canadian Obedience Trial Champion. I will never forget when the judge asked me how old he was and I replied “10.” The judge said, “My, what a precocious puppy.” Cato left us at the age of 14.

(Photo: Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

Stump posed for pictures with his handler, Scott Sommer. (Photo: Peter Kramer/Associated Press)