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The Biggest Winner

An old English sheepdog wins the America's Top Dog Model contest.

By Stephanie Brown

CORRECTION: Our print edition (Aug./Sept. 2009) listed James Young as the photographer for all of Dudley's photos. Mr. Young took the winning photo of Dudley, but our cover image and the other studio image were taken by photographer Dean Payne.

The results of the America's Top Dog Model 2009 contest are in, and for the first time in the contest's five year history, the winner is a male and a large breed. Dudley, an old English sheepdog, has taken the title after a five-month-long, nationwide search.

Owner Stephanie Klein of West Palm Beach, Fla., says she isn't exactly surprised that Dudley was named the contest's winner. While she acknowledges that most people think their dog is "the cutest," when it comes to Dudley, she says it just might be true.



America's Top Dog Model winner, Dudley (photo by Dean Payne)

According to Klein, the 15-month-old pooch often garners compliments and praise for being a good looking dog—and not just from her.

"It's not just my opinion," she said.

To prove it, Klein noted what it was like when she and "Duds" lived in New York City.

"We'd be walking on the street—and I am not exaggerating—I couldn't walk a block in less than an hour, because everyone wanted to stop and ask me about Dudley," she said.

More than 100 other dogs joined Dudley to vie for the title of America's Top Dog Model 2009. The contest invites all owners to submit a professional photo of their dogs depicting a particular theme. Twelve finalists are chosen, some at live events. From that pool, a winner is selected.

This year's theme was "Go Gorgeously Green," and dog owners had to submit a photograph that illustrated what their four-legged friends are doing to reduce their carbon "pawprint."

Jo Jo Harder, author and creator of the America's Top Dog Model contest, says she chose the theme because she is very passionate about the environment and conservation efforts.

"There are so many aspects of going green, and I just thought this would be a great opportunity to get that message out there and let dog owners know that they can also include their dogs in going green," Harder says.

Dudley was spotted at the Worth Avenue Pet Parade and America's Top Dog Model Casting Call held March 14 in Palm Beach, Fla. The parade's "Best in Show" winner in each of the three size categories (small, medium, large) was named an America's Top Dog Model finalist. A panel of four judges selected Dudley, dressed in a black and white striped prisoner costume, as the best in show in the large breed category.

"He stole the show," Klein says.

The Palm Beach event was one of two casting calls held this year. The other was in Minneapolis as part of the Animal Humane Society's annual "Walk for Animals." At that event, a panel of three judges selected two finalists.

The owners of the finalists then had to submit photos to be considered for the contest. In May, a panel of three judges from the pet, fashion and photography

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industries selected the remaining seven finalists and then the winner.

Harder said Dudley won the title because, as a larger breed, he stood out among the other contestants. Judges also appreciated how he represented the theme.

"The judges noticed him from the very beginning," Harder said.

In his winning photograph, Dudley is wearing a green handkerchief while sitting next to a green tote bag full of recyclable plastic bottles. Klein says she came up with the idea because Dudley likes to follow her when she takes the recycling out.

"He's my little partner," Klein says. "He always comes with me to the recycling bin, and when I'm pouring the bottles into the bin and one falls out, he picks it up with his mouth for me."

Klein says she chose the shot's location—in front of the Intercoastal Waterway in West Palm Beach—because Dudley loves the outdoors.

"He just loves the wind in his face, and I knew that's where he would be at his proudest," Klein says.

As the winner, Dudley's photo will be featured on the cover of America's Top Dog Model 2011 calendar. Additional prizes include a custom Austrian crystal crown, link collar, and collar charms (with matching necklace and earrings for Klein) from Buddy G's; a bon Christiani eco-friendly custom collar designed exclusively for Dudley; a Castlemere bamboo feeder; a Roadwagz organic cotton wrap; a Wagging Green collar and leash; and an autographed copy of Harder's book, "Diva Dogs: A Style Guide To Living The Fabulous Life."

The eleven finalists receive an Austrian crystal collar from Buddy G's and will also be featured in America's Top Dog Model 2011 calendar and on the website at www.americastopdogmodel.com.

Winning the contest has encouraged Klein to pursue show business opportunities for Dudley. Klein, who insists she is not a "stage mom," said Dudley is already slated to appear in movie called "A Dog-Gone Tail: Destiny's Stand."

"It's almost as if all of these are indicators that it should be something we should pursue," she says.

And if it makes people happy to see Dudley either on the silver screen or say, on a bag of pet food, Klein says that would make her happy.

As for the future of the America's Top Dog Model Contest, Harder says she plans to stay with the green theme for next year. She is also shopping the contest around as an idea for a reality television show.

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