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LEISURE

Every Dog Has His Day (Spa): Westminster Competitors Squeeze in Some Pre-Competition Pampering

By Emily Wilson

Feb 15—In one corner of the spa, clients are having their hair washed and blown dry. In another, one is enjoying a massage. The masseuse, Debbie Zimmermann, digs her fingers into the client's neck muscles and gently kneads. The client stretches, a glazed look in her eye.

"Good girl," Zimmermann murmurs.

Zimmermann's client, Cea, is a Black Russian Terrier, and she's just one of dozens of pooches that Zimmerman has worked on in the past two days, prepping them for their big moment in the ring at the 129th Westminster Dog Show, which opened yesterday at Madison Square Garden.

The Westminster show is to dog shows what the Superbowl is to football, and that means the dogs have a grueling schedule, what with the traveling, the waiting, and the pressure to put their best paw forward.

So this year, the Hotel Pennsylvania, which provides accommodations for about 2,000 of the 2,800 dogs in the show, decided to do what all of the best hotels do these days: provide some extra services to take care of the inner needs of their clientele. That includes massage for dogs and their owners at a dollar a minute and a dog communicator. Naturally, the hotel also provided space for the usual salon services of shampooing, grooming and nail trimming. And then there were the toilet facilities in the hotel's downstairs ballroom, which had been lined in plastic and covered in sawdust so these pampered pooches can relieve themselves without having to brave cold, rain and sidewalks.

Liam, an appropriately named Irish setter, and his owner Rhonda Ashton, have just come from a visit with the pet communicator, Joy Mason, who also holds a degree in veterinary medicine. Ashton, of Downey, Calif., said she wanted Mason to remind Liam to do what he's supposed to in the ring.

Mason, who is based in Ventura, Calif., said she would head over to see Liam in the ring Tuesday afternoon and remind him of their talk.

"He's an awesome dog," she said. "He's got a great personality for showing, but he needs to listen to his handler."

Mason, who charges \$40 for a reading of about 20 minutes, said she loves her work now, but the way she found out she could communicate with dogs wasn't so pleasurable. Mason was working as a veterinarian, and she said she was getting the illnesses of the animals she was treating.

"When animals came in, I would get what they had," she said. "It was not fun."

Now, Mason said, she instead enjoys getting information from the dogs she reads. Many of the owners

want to know if their dog wants to retire or keep showing, if they are feeling stressed, or just to tell them to listen in the ring. Mason said her most unusual reading she's done in the last four days was for a Cairn terrier, Oscar.

"He told me he was definitely ready to win," she said. "And he did. He did really well in his breed. I saw him on T.V. last night. "

Jerry Grymek, who during the year is in public relations for the hotel, seems delighted to be, for this week, in what he calls "pooch relations." He said the feedback he has gotten on Mason is wonderful.

"She acts as a telephone between the owners and their dogs," he said. "People might be a little bit skeptical at first, but once they see her in action, they can't believe it."

Grymek, who was wearing a tie printed with tiny Dalmatians with red bows, said next year, the hotel staff is considering bringing in an animal psychic as well. Some people might be forgiven for thinking the two are the same. But that's not so.

"A communicator reads the present," he said. "A psychic can read the future. So how their dog will do in the show is what I'm sure everyone will ask."

Next to Mason's booth, Cea, who had traveled from San Diego to compete, was still being massaged by Zimmermann. This was the dog's fourth time there in as many days.

Massage is different from mere petting, Zimmermann said as she worked.

"There's a lot of tension here," she said. "They're thinking 'I have to get in the crate, I have to get out of the crate, I have to go pee in sawdust, that dog over there just gave me a dirty look.' Petting is important for bonding and it can help to distract them, but it can't give them back their self confidence."

As Cea sprawls out on the floor, her owner, Annie Rice, says she can see how much relaxed a massage makes her dog.

"She goes to the dog chiropractor and the dog acupuncturist, so I knew she would love a massage," she said. "Any girl would."