

Pull Quote: “In the run up to this year’s biggest dog show, an unlikely candidate is too eager to please.”

Heading: Ain't Nothing but a Hound Dog

By Nick Broad

“Darwin!” shouted his owner, Alicia Bralove, as for the fifth time in five minutes her 15” beagle tried to hump my leg. For a champion show dog, Darwin seemed to pay little attention to his name, continuing to hump until physically removed. “He’s disciplined by his trainer,” Bralove apologized, “but when I see him I just melt.”

Almost one year ago Beagle-Mania swept the nation after another hound, Uno, became the first beagle to be crowned winner of the renowned Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show in front of a capacity crowd at Madison Square Garden.

Over the next twelve months Uno fetched the first pitch at Major League Baseball games in Milwaukee and St. Louis, rang the bell for the NASDAQ market, rode upon the Peanuts float at the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and even met President and First Lady George and Laura Bush in the White House Rose Garden. CNN, one of many networks to cover Uno’s story, compared his underdog victory to that of Obama’s presidential campaign. The video, which can be found on YouTube, is accompanied by comments like “I’d vote for [Uno], can’t be any dumber than what we already have,” and “Obama/Uno ’08!”

Now we have a new president, and on February 10th, Bralove is hoping that Darwin will win a second term for Beagle-Mania. “If anyone can’t understand why 25,000 people could stand up cheering the name of a dog,” she said, “they haven’t ever owned a beagle.” She and her husband, both avid dog-fanciers who live on Park Avenue in Carnegie Hill, say that Darwin is the canine equivalent of a rock star on his home turf, stealing the adoration of doormen, crossing guards and pedestrians, all the way to Central Park and back. Having grown up with her father’s champion borzois, Bralove is used to competitive dogs, and Darwin is no exception.

His ancestry is full of champion beagles—all four grandparents were champions—and his father was previously nominated “Best of Group” (Hounds) at the Westminster Kennel Club dog show, beating basset hounds, foxhounds and whippets, among others. But Darwin faces tough competition, and the odds are against him. All of the 2,500 dogs permitted to enter the event are champions, each candidates for the coveted title of “Best in Show.” Also, Uno’s success might be a political hindrance to Darwin—only once in the event’s 132-year history have two different dogs from the same breed won in consecutive years.

Despite this, Bralove is optimistic. The HMS Beagle was the vessel that brought Charles Darwin on the voyage that gave him much of the inspiration for his work, *On the Origin of Species*. Convinced her dog is an evolutionary masterpiece deserving of the winning title, Bralove has prepared well for the upcoming event, putting Darwin in the hands of accomplished dog handler, Laura McCoy.

Darwin certainly looks the part. His ears are completely floppy; the mark of a good beagle, I’m told. He’s well proportioned and “his tail carrying is spectacular,”

Bralove said. Also, he walks two miles a day, giving his chest a firm, muscular look.

Energetic and friendly—if a bit *too* friendly—his irrepressible confidence is both entertaining and endearing. Bralove's twelve-year-old son, James, is lucky to have such a pet.

I got the feeling that Darwin was unaware of his heritage. When not focusing on wooing my leg, he continued the playful mischief by jumping up on a table to find food. Without a collar his bark was irrepressible and fairly loud. “Beagles are bred to communicate,” Bralove told me, “their bark is supposed to be heard one mile away. I dispute that—it's more like two.” I wondered for a while whether he might need some more discipline, but after seeing him play with Bralove and her son, I realized he is more a pet to them than an athlete. When asked whether he'd be able to stand still in front of a 25,000-strong crowd, she said, “He's a Gemini. He has a split personality, and with long periods of activity followed by long periods of rest. When you leave he'll probably just curl up in bed, and that'll be it.”

The Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show is the second oldest continually held sporting competition in the United States (the oldest is the Kentucky Derby), and is the sister competition to England's world-famous Crufts. The history of the event is intimidating. But, “The outcome doesn't matter,” Bralove said, “it's not like Michael Phelps on the verge of an 8th medal. It's the prestige of being entered that matters.” On February 9th I'll be there to watch the show, hoping to see this bipolar hound dog in all his glory.