

Placement and Clerking: A devotional approach

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Placement workers are the altar boys of rose shows. It is their job to get it there, get it right, and on time. The basic requirements for the position include a general state of health not associated with palsy and a fleeting acquaintance with the alphabet.

The health requirement does not discriminate against the old; at any given show Social Security recipients can usually be seen nipping along depositing entries into the correct categories. (For some reason there is a positive association between age and familiarity with the alphabet; possibly it has to do with the educational establishment's rejection of the patriarchal precision of the progression from A to Z.)

Problems with the alphabet are really problems with the inability to predict the number of roses to be submitted especially in the popular classes like the Hybrid Teas and miniatures. No matter how carefully the letters are arranged, there will be a surplus of roses beginning with I (Irresistible, Incognito) and a dearth of those labeled Zinger. Predicting the number of other miniatures at the same show is a mug's game. The careful placement worker accommodates the frequent movement of invisible lines separating Sam Trivet from Santa Claus and hopes for the best.

The obvious enemies of efficient placement are the flowing robes, batwing sleeves and the independently moving object like the awkward elbow. There is also, of course, the deliberate bottle bounce as the placement worker dumps the entry onto the table with a view to testing whether the rose is firmly ensconced in the vase. Despite many exhibitor requests for investigation, no one has ever been able to find an eyewitness to this procedure. The increase in the number of classes at shows also places space at a premium and the degree of maneuverability at a minimum. A show with 40 classes pushes space and dexterity concerns to the limit; a show with 90 classes taxes the skill of even the most balletic of placement workers.

Placement workers can bring benefits to a show. Attentive and knowledgeable workers will return an erroneously labeled entry to the exhibitor. In fact, some placement workers are known for their skill in this regard. Others murmur judiciously about incorrect class assignments, left over Q-tips, and omitted dates and rose identifications (where required). Undermining this talent is the degree to which show rules have become one of John Stuart Mill's dead truths and people have stopped reading them. While it is usually true that Old Garden Rose classes require the designation of types of roses and date of introduction, not all shows continue to repeat the necessity of having them. (One consequence of this copying is that grammatical errors continue to be repeated from one show to the next, but who would be so gross as to name names?)

The incidental benefits to placement workers are not always easy to adduce. If the placement worker is to continue on to clerk for a show, knowing where the classes are located is desirable, but hardly worth the extra two hours of lost sleep. The pay is non-existent. For me the benefits include the camaraderie of the placement crew and the sense of accomplishing a particular and finite task competently and efficiently. Early premonitions of winners and a kind of sad rejection of obvious losers appear to be part of the coin of the realm. A particularly dazzling entry of a dozen or four dozen roses draws the attention and the indrawn breath of almost every placement worker regardless of the current task. Indeed, such adoration is an almost expected part of the duty of both altar boys and placements

workers. Of course, seeing such beauty early in the morning is nothing to be sneezed at. Come to think of it, sneezers are generally disqualified for placement.

Clerking:

If placement workers are altar boys, then clerks are the Eucharistic Ministers who distribute the transubstantiated wafers in the form of attaching the designated ribbons to the entries that the judges reward. This is the second most proactive thing that clerks do.

The other is to shepherd the judges from one class to another in territory normally unfamiliar to them. If the clerks haven't done any placement for that show, it is probably unfamiliar to the clerk as well (a process disappointed exhibitors might well label the lame leading the blind.).

There are two negative functions that the clerks are abjured to perform: be quiet and keep out of the way. Do not make faces at the decision of the judges. Do not comment on the decisions of the judges. Forget the 13th Amendment to the Constitution and be of use to the team of judges. The agility factor rule is necessary because four or more people (2 judges, 2 clerks) are trying to occupy a space designed for one half or one quarter the number present two judging and two ribbon attaching. Efficient clerking teams will divide so that one clerk finishes the task of ribbon-attaching while the other leads the judges to the next class to be viewed.

Clerks tend to have particular preferences in judging teams as to fast, slow, pleasant, sneezy, and grumpy (all right, there IS no grumpy.) Many clerks prefer judges who talk to each other, but this does slow down the pace a significant factor when apprentice judges are part of the team. And you do hear some utterances that deserve investigation:

Just because it has a strong odor doesn't mean it has great fragrance. (The judge may have inhaled Eau de Raid while sniffing a fragrance class entry.) Even if the judges have telepathic communication and never speak to each other, the pace is automatically slowed by the need to rank the blue ribbon entries in the Hybrid Tea and Miniature classes; this gives the clerks time to attach the honorable mention ribbons.

Clerking is not something that people continue to do; as one eminent rosarian has noted, it is a transitional stage from novice to exhibitor. Certainly the benefits of watching judges judge is invaluable if you want to know what judges are looking for. There is the gratitude of the person in charge of obtaining clerks for a rose show. Given the rapidity with which clerks disappear from the ranks, it might not be a bad idea to provide incidental benefits in the form of perks. Or at least plenary indulgences.

One disqualifying factor for clerks might be the condition of left-handedness. Left-handers tend to put the ribbons in backwards and thus the symmetry of hundreds of ribbons all falling to the right is ruined by the occasional sinister presence. It seems to be the rosarian equivalent to religious apostasy.

Placement personnel and clerks are minor but necessary functionaries in the ritual of a rose show. Even on their knees they perform a vital service so long as they haven't fallen down on the job. And in the best of all possible worlds they move on to the priesthood of exhibitors.

VCRS is proud to announce that the American Rose Society Award Of Merit was awarded to Jim Delahanty for this article in "The Ventura Rose."

