

The Rewards of Losing

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In a rose show competition winners and losers litter the landscape. In the nature of things these designations are not distributed randomly among the population at large nor in the smaller precincts of those who exhibit at rose shows. If you accept the opinion that exhibitors engage in the tasks of growing, cutting, grooming, and transporting roses-usually in the off hours, solely for the intrinsic reward of revealing the rose in all its glory, that validates the task in the first place. If you subscribe to the orthodoxy that the rose show is a major educational tool in the promotion of the rose, there is no need to examine the motivations of either the winners or the losers any further. If you have the capacity to believe in six impossible things before breakfast, that leaves only four to go. Winning exhibitors may be motivated by the intrinsic reward of displaying the rose at its optimum. Or, perhaps, by the excitement of the quest for the most nearly perfect rose, contrasted with the impossibility of ever actually attaining that goal. More popular is the explanation that they do so for the sheer exuberance of winning; we will pass over quickly the gentle irony expressed in the wish that 'May all your roses be kings.' Most popular is the charge that top exhibitors do so for purposes of collecting hardware as if the collection of large amounts of silver and glass were sufficient impetus for the effort expended.

Top exhibitors, generally defined as those who frequent the trophy table show after show, are but a small segment of the total number of exhibitors, but easily the most important one. They provide the class exhibits; they supply the greatest number of entries in a rose show. And their discards frequently equal the best efforts of casual or sporadic exhibitors. But theirs is not a world totally free from flies in the ointment of success. For one thing the term frequently associated with top exhibitors is 'hard-core;' the association is not complimentary as it produces images of an unsightly and unseemly industry largely located in the San Fernando Valley. For another thing top exhibitors are very good at what they do. Consequently, they tend to monopolize through talent and diligence the garnering of trophies and awards. As one respected and honest judge put it: If you tell me who is exhibiting, I can tell you who will win. Of eighty some exhibitors in Southern California who might win a trophy in a given year, perhaps a dozen exhibitors would be considered in the top echelon.

It would be cruel to call the other seventy winning exhibitors 'losers.' It would also be accurate. Their presence on the trophy table is erratic, even unusual, and infrequent. However, unless we adopt the ethos of the Special Olympics whereby anyone entering a competition is a winner, the motivations and rewards of the 'other' or intermediate exhibitors must be examined with a view to understanding and encouraging their presence. Conventional wisdom asserts that unless the intermediate exhibitors win something once in a while, they will cease to be a part of the rose show and the ranks of exhibitors and the rose show will be diminished accordingly.

If the rewards of the intermediate exhibitors are intrinsic, there is little that need or could be done by the organizers of rose shows except to enhance those outcomes wherever convenient and inexpensive. For some the sharing of unusual or 'different' roses at a rose show seems to give pleasure. For people who grow and like to show non-traditional roses, the question of exhibiting at any particular rose show depends upon weighing the inconvenience of attending versus the number of classes where such roses might be shown. Several local shows, including both the San Fernando rose show and the Pacific rose show contain nearly a dozen classes open to non-traditional roses. These rose shows have nearly sixty classes. Other shows are smaller in scope with about half that number of classes and, thereby, fewer opportunities to display roses other than modern Hybrid Teas, Floribundas and miniatures. It should be clearly understood that the expansion of the number of classes does not increase the chances of

intermediate exhibitors to win awards in the long run; while the intermediate exhibitor might enjoy the opportunity to show off rare and unusual roses, the top exhibitors will simply practice their skills and dedication in a new arena.

Another intrinsic reward is the camaraderie and sociability of exhibitors. The extension of invitations to breakfast or lunch (after the judges or separately) probably adds significantly to this factor; on the other hand, the sociables frequently make plans for eating, cruising malls, and shopping to fill the hours while the judges rate the entries. And one should not underestimate the appeal of this reward: as Clair Martin, curator of roses at the Huntington has remarked: If you ask a rosarian a question, be prepared to wait a half hour before he takes a breath. Rosarian conversations tend to be long ones.

While the same intrinsic reward of displaying the rose at its optimum is putatively available to the 'other' exhibitor as to the top exhibitor, public validation of the effort will not take place with any regularity. And the same goes for the jubilation of winning or garnering hardware. In fact, once you shift the attention from the intrinsic rewards to the extrinsic, the problem of providing extrinsic rewards to the 'others,' can largely be defined as excluding the top exhibitors.

On some occasions this can be a natural occurrence as when the top exhibitors are off at a national show or all suddenly taken with an inexplicable illness. But more often, the extension of extrinsic rewards to 'other' exhibitors is accomplished by excluding the top exhibitors from competition in the first place. This is most evident in the utilization of the 'Novice' class; only those who have not won an ARS certificate are permitted to enter or in other cases, only those who have not won any trophy are permitted to enter. The idea here is to encourage novices to participate and show roses with a reasonable expectation of winning the class in question. Whether this is desirable or not might be argued, but it does have the patina of age in its favor.

Less defensible is the exclusion of top exhibitors from attending or exhibiting in a rose show in the first place. In an extreme form, a rose show schedule may exclude all those not living within a stipulated geographic range. In the more acceptable form, one section or class is limited to those belonging to the sponsoring rose society. In either form, the playing field is altered so that the pool of entrants no longer reflects the prevailing ratio of top exhibitors to 'other' exhibitors. (Some exhibitors negate the restricted class approach by belonging to a variety of rose societies, so the asymmetry of the total pool is reduced.)

The South Coast Rose Society rose show features a different approach—the creation of a section called 'Amateur Enthusiasts.' The show schedule defines this class as 'only open to exhibitors who have never won Queen, Dowager Queen, King or Princess of Show at an ARS rose show.' In the welcoming statement the term 'amateur enthusiasts' is defined 'as rose growers who have yet to win a blue ribbon.' However, the governing rule is that enunciated in relation to the show rules, that is, the exclusion of previous winners of specified royalty. An extra half hour is extended for 'amateur enthusiasts' for the grooming and entering of roses. Non-qualifying exhibitors, or top exhibitors, are exhorted to advise and assist the 'amateurs' in this extended time period.

Another promising approach relies upon the number of roses grown by the entrant as the dividing line between the top echelons of rose exhibitors versus others. A significant effect here is to include those living in circumstances which militate against large numbers of roses—apartment or condominium developments as well as re-including those who might have downsized their gardens for reasons of drought, age, or infirmity. One major advantage of this approach is that it does not overtly exclude anyone based on past success.

Another approach has been floated but not endorsed by Frank Grasso, District co-chair of judges in the Pacific Southwest District. He adumbrated the adoption of a three-tiered system, including top exhibitor classes, an intermediate level of exhibitor classes, and the current Novice class. A discussion of this sketchy outline on the VenturaRose listserv elicited strongly negative reactions. A few of the discussants rejected the notion as a logistical nightmare. Others rejected the division of exhibitors into elite versus non-elite group without even considering the problems of circulation of elites or maintenance of separate lists and challenges. It is true that the existence of such a division is reflected in the results of rose shows from one week to the next; but there seems to be substantial and impassioned resistance to the notion of formalizing that division in any public way.

There is a widespread assumption that the care and feeding of 'other' exhibitors necessitates the exclusion of the top exhibitors from competition. So long as the problem is conceived in terms of providing the same kind of rewards for 'other' exhibitors-that is, the awarding of public recognition and trophies, there will be a stain attached to such rewards. The desire to reward excellence in the growing of roses by reference to the ideal of a rose at its peak of development conflicts with the desire not to discourage permanently those not in the upper ranks of rose exhibitors. These two drives must ultimately collide. There are strict logical imperatives inhibiting the expansion of the exclusionary tactic: the undermining of the entire awards system. Perhaps the emphasis should be shifted to maximizing the intrinsic rewards for the intermediate group as opposed to the extrinsic ones. Or perhaps the anomaly I have noted is an acceptable compromise with reality, so long as it remains limited.

Meanwhile, I will go polish my slightly soiled trophy.

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