

At Long Last, Westminster Gives Rat Terriers a Chance to Show

By [RICHARD SANDOMIR](#) FEB. 12, 2014

Harriett Browne had the chicken morsels that Q and Dinger coveted. They were hungry Tuesday afternoon, up on their hind legs, seeking their rewards after competing in the first breed judging for rat terriers in the history of the Westminster Kennel Club Dog Show. Q belongs to Browne, who lives in Columbus, Ohio, and Dinger is owned by her friend Darice Ragan, a rat terrier breeder from Greenback, Tenn.

“This is a true American-bred dog,” Browne said. “My grandparents had this dog.”

Dinger became Ragan’s to raise and show after the death of the woman who bred and owned him in Miami.

“And he’s become a real country boy, swimming in creeks and running through pastures,” Ragan said. “So this show is dedicated to her.”

Q and Dinger (based on a baseball-inspired formal name that includes “Grand Slam”) did not win best of breed and the victor, Marti, did not win the terrier group later that night.



Darice Ragan and Dinger @ the 138th Westminster show, NYC.

New breeds like rat terrier — and the other newbies at the show, the chinook and the Portuguese Podengo Pequeno — generally need time at an elite show like Westminster to demonstrate their bona fides. There are, after all, plenty of breeds that have never won. It took until 2008, more than 130 years into Westminster’s [history](#), for a beagle, Uno, to win.

Rat terriers, it should be said, do not resemble rats. Rats are among their field prey. It is not an especially lovely name, but Browne asked, “Who forgets it?”

They are small, delightful, peppy dogs whose ancestry is derived from crossbreeding the fox terrier with various other terriers, and later with more terriers, beagles, whippets, Italian greyhounds and others, the American Kennel Club said. They are also linked to a small hunting dog breed called the feist, which William Faulkner wrote about in stories like “The Bear.” But he spelled it “fyce.”

During a conversation with literature students at the University of Virginia in 1957, he described the fyce as “any small dog, usually he was a fox or rat terrier at one time, that has gotten mixed up with hound, with bird-dog, everything else, but any small dog in my country is called a fyce.”

He added, "I never knew a fyce yet that realized that he wasn't as big as anything else he ever saw, even a bear."

Frank Rogers, a Mississippi-born architect who lives in the Park Slope section of Brooklyn, said at Westminster that he bought his still-excitabile and speedy rat terrier, Buster, 12 years ago — largely because he is a Faulkner fan.

"Buster barely tolerated being shown, but he loved to race," he said. "He wouldn't stop barking until the race started."

Despite the [breed's](#) deep roots in America, the American Kennel Club did not recognize the rat terrier until last year, an action that finally ushered in its debut showing at Westminster on Tuesday.

"It's taken a long time," said Kimberly Seegmiller, a breeder in Glenwood, Mo., who is the interim secretary of the Rat Terrier Club of America. "But rat terriers became nearly extinct when farmers left the Dust Bowl and they didn't need their dogs. They kind of came back when a few people had them in the '60s and '70s, but even by the '80s, they were still pretty rare. And they're still not prevalent."

It required the club petitioning the A.K.C. for five years and complying with its rules to get the rat terrier recognized last June, she said. From then until the end of 2013, the A.K.C. registered 3,268 rat terriers.

Browne, who said recognition was overdue, proudly cited the date when she started to show Q in A.K.C.-sanctioned confirmation shows: June 26, 2013.

"I think people took rat terriers for granted," she said.

Dinger got an award as best male nonchampion in the rat terrier ring, which gave him enough points to make him a champion.

"He's one of the few rat terriers who has that title," Ragan said.

But Q's Westminster debut was marred by what Browne said was "reverse sneezing" from inhaling a chemical on the floor of the show ring.

"He couldn't concentrate on my commands," she said. Once he left the ring, he recovered and was in pursuit of chicken and kisses.