

Some Thoughts About Competition

By Dr. Kent Campbell

As with so much of his writing, Bob Martin's superb acceptance speech for his Klima Award last year points to the importance of the rose show to the existence and growth of a society. Further, he maintains that it is a tool in teaching, learning, and, indeed, constantly improving rose culture.

Unfortunately, there seems to be a small but vocal group of members within many societies that are anti-exhibitors because they "do not believe in competition." I was in the field of education for thirty-eight years and the "good and bad" of competition has been debated in those circles for at least that long or longer.

The earliest competition that comes to mind produced a very bad result. Two brothers of the first family, Cain and Abel, built separate altars and made sacrifices to the Lord. Cain, sensing that Abel's sacrifice found the most favor with the Lord "raised up in anger and slew his brother."

A far different result came when the Greeks in the sixth century B.C. conceived the Olympics to honor their strongest, fastest, brightest, and most artistic citizens. The object was to reduce the probability of war among the city-states which would be preparing for the games. Here, therefore, may be the first planned effort to channel the natural human instinct to win into a harmless competitive situation.

Realizing this side of human nature, societies long ago began exploiting the concept of competition to invigorate efforts and improve results in nearly every facet of life. As a result, the modern free industrial world, and America especially, has become a culture steeped in competition. It is difficult to think of any human endeavor, from schooling to vocation, to avocation, that has not been turned into a contest. Our over-abundance of sports at all levels, and for both sexes, is just the beginning. Pastimes, hobbies and clubs of all descriptions have competitive aspects, if they are not actual contests in their entirety.

It is a proven fact that competition stimulates efforts to achieve. The Adam Smith theory of a free economy holds simply that the individual who makes the best pair of shoes for the most logical price will be the most successful. Modern economy has become a great deal more complex than that, but a competitive market out-produces every other type of market in the world.

As alluded to earlier, competition can have a bad side under certain conditions. For all the benefits we know that can accrue from rose shows, there can be negative aspects resulting from the competition. (Please notice that I did not use the verb "are", but "can be", meaning simply that there is a possibility of questionable effects, not a certainty.) Following are some of the negatives that can arise from competition.

1. Rose shows over-stress competition until winning becomes so important that all other aspects of the show (beauty, friendship, education, recruitment, et. al.) are subordinated – even lost.

2. Rose shows concentrate attention upon prize-winning cultivars and thus limit the variety needed for an artistic garden.
3. High-pressure preparation before a show produces a nervous and physical strain on some participants.
4. The letdown after a competition, particularly after losing, over-balances the value of the stimulation originally provided by the show.
5. The competition idea stimulates the competitive instinct rather than the artistic; that is, the individual's interest in the show is essentially to win, not to help produce a great work of art to give to the community.
6. Disappointment over losing an entry or a disagreement with the judges' decision may lead to hard feelings, loss of friendships, or even withdrawal from the society by those affected by the results, or offended by criticism of the loser.

The dislike of competition is an attitude, and attitudes are learned. This is an attribute which can arise from many different sources. Overstressing competitive situations with children can be unhealthy and produce lingering effects. Individuals that do not "win" very often in many of life's events tend to hate competition.

Older rosarians must combat negative attitudes about shows, especially as they affect exhibiting the products of one's efforts to others. Friendship and guidance to novices go a long way toward building good attitudes toward the total rose hobby.

The following statement from a 1929 issue of a school music magazine is still worth considering after 70 years: "Fine performance ought always to be the outcome of inward appreciation – not an artificially imposed ribbon or certificate." Is it too idealistic to think along these lines today? If one works with the love of beauty in the forefront of their thinking, rather than the love of winning, the greatest of all possible pleasures will be achieved, the creation of something special!

While the positive values of rose shows have been mentioned here and there throughout this little essay, the following statement from one of the younger members of our society, Mary Ann Hext, who has been exhibiting for only two or three years seems like a good way to end. It draws things together very nicely. "From my point of view, rose shows aren't really competitive events, but a way to share what we have worked so hard to produce. We see varieties of roses that we are not familiar with that may encourage us to grow for ourselves. We meet other rosarians and share experiences, making new friends. It is nice to get a ribbon or dot and to get something on the trophy table, but the rose show is like a culminating event for us to display our efforts. It is not so much a competition against each other, but against ourselves to work harder to produce better quality roses. I have a hard time understanding how anyone could think a rose show is not a wonderful event for a society."