

**The Trial removal of the Semi-finals for Heelwork to Music and Freestyle Crufts
Qualification – AGM Discussion paper.
(Paper Published 3rd May 2022)**

This paper is written in reference to the changes in the qualification process, for competitors from within the sport of Heelwork to Music to gain qualification status and compete at the Crufts finals. At present, the highest placed competitors in an advanced qualifying class (at a Premier Licensed Show) will gain a place in the Crufts Finals the following year, after any other already qualified dog and handler teams. This limits the qualifying spaces to one in each division per show, at only ten shows per year. This system is being trialled following a decision by the KC HTM Working Party not to hold a Semi-finals for Crufts 2023.

Early indications are that the removal of the semi-finals is already having an impact on the sport. Committee members for the national bodies, Paws n Music Association and Canine Freestyle GB, have been speaking to many show managers and handlers, including past, upcoming and present advanced handlers. We understand all proposed qualification processes will have their pros and cons. However, currently the negatives we are experiencing and being reported to us far outweigh the positives. It is important that the community are able to provide feedback and input on how the trial is going and whether it is deemed successful enough for it to continue. Particularly given there was not a consultation at that time the decision was made to run the trial and not to hold the Semi-finals next year.

From what we have gathered, there appears to be wide recognition that the semi-finals were integral to the sport and worked as a stepping stone to the Crufts Finals. The Semi-finals were much more than just about qualification for Crufts. It was a pinnacle event and a highlight in the year to handlers whose ambition was to qualify and enter for this annual event. It gave teams ambition to seek and work towards a qualifier, even when they did not anticipate, or wish to, make the Crufts Finals. It also provided an important feedback loop on how they were performing overall against the current standard across the country. The event provided a target and motivation for many, whether they be experienced, inexperienced, or bringing on young dogs in some cases. More widely, we lost a prestigious event, where members of the wider HTM and dog sports community could come together from across the UK, to celebrate our sport and see the routines to be performed at Crufts in the flesh. Another point of feedback is that the event could have been expanded to include additional classes and awards, which would further widen its appeal, prestige and financial viability.

For those who do not get one of the ten qualifying places, what are the motivators now to remain in the sport? Without the semi-finals what do we have that will

motivate advanced handlers and give them something to aspire to and work towards? These questions become even more important when you remove such a critical element of the system of reward and progression.

A particular concern is that securing judges for qualifying classes has become incredibly difficult, with many experienced judges holding off agreeing to judging appointments until such time they have qualified. Given the very limited number of spaces available, and lead up time for judging appointment acceptance, this will have an impact on shows for the majority of the qualifying season. Knock-on effects include pressure and reliance on an extremely small pool of judges; lack of qualified people to fill posts; time consuming delays for show management; and significant delays in the release of schedules and the potential loss of show entries.

There is now also increased pressure on advanced handlers to travel far and wide, chasing the very small number of spaces at Crufts. Not only are there fewer spaces, there are also less shows at which they can be attained. This has come at a time when there are huge pressures on the economy and significant price rises, hitting the pockets of many that cannot afford such a commitment. It is unlikely these pressures will be going away any time soon and this could lead to the sport losing competitors to other sports, where there are more opportunities and motivational factors to compete and progress. We are already hearing evidence of this from some advanced handlers. We are also seeing so far the numbers in the advance classes has declined.

The loss of the semi-finals also means there is no scrutiny of routines destined to be performed for the first time at Crufts. Issues that could easily have been addressed beforehand with feedback at the semi-finals now do not come to light until they are performed in front of millions of people. That can have negative consequences on both individuals and the sport as a whole.

It is not possible to go into every detail and every potential impact in this paper. We also cannot say we have fully covered all aspects of this debate. We do, however, hope the above demonstrates just how important is it to consider whether the system being trialled is in the best interests of the sport as a whole.

The Committees for Canine Freestyle GB and Paws N Music Association have jointly prepared this paper as we believe this needs to be flagged early on for community input and people need to be aware that the trial is far from plain sailing for those most impacted by it. Our hope is that the working party will consider these issues, input from our association members and the people running shows, in reviewing whether the trial should continue.

For those less familiar we provide a brief summary below of the system in place prior to the trial commencing. We should note there has been consultation on the removal of the semi-finals in the past, which led to the majority expressing a desire the semi-finals to remain. In summary:

- The top two scoring dog and handler teams in each qualifier class at a Premier Show would gain a place at the semi-finals in January every year.
- If they already had a qualifier or chose not to take up the qualifier, it would go down to the next highest scoring team in the class at that show.
- There was to be 12 premier shows per year spread around the UK. This meant there would be 24 places in each discipline at the Semi-finals, with the previous year's Crufts winner given direct entry to the Semi-finals (making a maximum total of 25 competing in each division).
- The top ten scoring team in each discipline at the Semi-Finals would go on to compete in the Crufts Finals. Should anyone drop out the next highest scoring team at the Semi-finals would be invited to replace them at the finals.

Before the trial began a number of clubs offered to take on the management and running of the Semi-finals when Rugby DTC stepped down from this role. Should it be deemed appropriate to revert back to the previous system the event could be a joint venture between our societies, subject to our members' support. The focus would be on making this a prestigious, well-run event and engaging with other societies to ensure the event was appealing to the wider HTM community and ensuring its financial viability. There are many show organisers willing to help with extensive expertise in running shows; judging and competing at all levels; and organising special events.

Our two organisations together have a strong membership from all areas of the UK. We hope that means we can all provide useful and productive input into such an important decision for our sport.

We are seeking the views and comments from our members on this paper and inviting people to add any other relevant points, views or information that can usefully feed into this discussion. It would be useful for context if people could include in their comments their level of experience (such as class level, show management and involvement/experience of the Semi Finals and Crufts Finals) so that we can understand better what different perspectives we are capturing and where people are coming from.