

Presenting a Perfect Picture

By Corky Vroom

The art of showing dogs is a lot like a chess game. You are trying to present the dog as perfectly as possible by hiding any faults, and the judge is trying to catch you. The picture you present in the ring means a lot. You want to convince the judge that your dog is perfect. After all, choosing the winner is a subjective interpretation, and the best dog doesn't always win.

Judges generally keep track of individual dogs by charting their positives and negatives. At the end of the judging, you want to have more positives, and thus fewer negatives, than other handler-dog teams. Paying attention to the judge and what he or she is looking at is fundamental to winning. If you make too many mistakes in the ring, you will be eliminated from contention. On the other hand, if you go into the ring proudly, bit the judge and your dog will pick up on your confidence.

Your upbeat attitude will positively impact the dog. Keep in mind it's much better to have a dog that thinks he is good than is necessarily good. Your expertise in presenting a perfect picture of the dog you are handling could make a huge difference in the color of rosette you take home. If you win your class and find yourself among the Winners Class contenders, don't be intimidated by the Open Class winner. The Open winner is not always the best dog. The Open winner is simply the best of the dogs judged in that class. Many times, the Best of Breed winner comes from the classes such as Bred by Exhibitor, 12-to-18, or American Bred.

Remember, if you try hard, you have a chance. If you think you are defeated, you are. The impression you make in the ring goes a long way on the judge's checklist. Your body position and attitude are interwoven with how well the dog performs. Handlers who are nervous or unsure of themselves tend to make dogs apprehensive. People in the audience keep their eyes on handlers who appear to know what they are doing. The judge is the same way. You do not want to be someone who is beat before ever walking in the ring. Instead, you want to convey a positive attitude that carries over to your dog.

Shifting into Show Mode

Professional handlers have a definite advantage over novice handlers. From the minute they walk into the ring, they are showing the dog at the end of the lead. A novice, on the other hand, may slink into the ring not paying any attention to how he or she appears and waiting for instructions from the judge. Often they are intimidated from the start. The better practice is to enter the ring with enthusiasm. Once you reach your place, you should stack your dog and go immediately into show mode. Nine out of 10 times a judge won't pay attention to your early endeavors, but the 10th time he will notice. All it takes is one time to be noticed to capture a win.

Long before you enter the show ring with your dog, be sure to read the breed standard and understand what is important in the judging of your breed. However, keep in mind that interpretation of the breed standard is subjective. What may be more beneficial is to think of a dog that impresses you. Put that image in your mind and try to emulate it in your presentation. Whenever you stack the dog or move with the dog, try to make the dog look like the picture in your head.

Stacking is an unnatural position for a dog, and most dogs will not hold the position very long. The important thing is that a stacked dog should not move when the judge is examining the dog. If the dog does move, you should reposition him. Doing so turns a negative into a positive. If you get nervous when the dog moves, the dog will sense this and may tighten up. It's a Catch-22. Instead, take breath and fox the problem. To help calm your nerves, be prepared before you walk in the ring. Observe the judge in an earlier class or group to learn his procedure in the ring. Once you are in the ring, be observant about what is going on.

When you stack a dog you are trying to hide his faults, such as front feet turning outward or cow-hocked rear legs. A judge is going to examine the dog from the front, the side and the rear. The judge never sees the whole dog except when he or she steps away from the dog. This allows you time to correct legs that have shifted out of position. For example, when the judge is reviewing the dog's side, you should calmly fix the back leg that has shifted because this is the

part the judge will look at next. Don't worry about the rear legs if the judge is examining the dog's front. You should focus on correcting the part that comes next.

When the judge examines the front of the dog, he or she is checking to see whether the dog is square, has a good expression and is alert with erect ears. Standing over the dog, the judge will check whether the dog's angle is straight from the side view. In the rear view, a dog should have straight hocks. Hocks that are not straight are considered a common fault. A dog that is out of alignment forces a judge to think this is his natural structure.

When a judge asks to see two dogs in the middle of the ring, this is a maneuver that often separates men from boys, women from girls. Here, a dog is being compared in the stacked position. Among tricks that can be used to help hold a dog in this position is bait, or pieces of food. Other techniques can be used as well, but it is important to know what works well with an individual dog. The dog's temperament and cooperation has a lot to do with how well he holds the stacked position.

Gaiting around the ring is another opportunity to present a pretty picture of your dog. You want to make sure the dog is moving as well as possible when you cross before the judge. You should move at a proper speed and distance from the handler and dog in front of you. A moderate speed works best. In fact, most handlers tend to gait too fast. Try to move at a nice, easy pace. A dog may become apprehensive if you move too fast. You should concentrate on setting an optimal speed for you and your dog with the image of the "perfect" dog prominently in your mind. You can adjust your speed when you are behind the judge's back, but be sure to move properly in front of the judge.

Handling a dog to a win correlates with how well you present a picture of a perfect dog. Remember, it is much like a chess game. Your ability to play down any faults and promote a dog's best attributes can make a big difference. In the end, you want to make sure the judge has seen more positive than negative checkmarks by your dog's number. The art of showing a Best in Show winner is within reach if you exude confidence and expertise.

A retired professional all-breed handler, Corky Vroom of Denton, Texas, achieved more than 1,000 Bests in Show, including handling three dogs ranked No. 1 in the country, during his 4-year career. He also served as president of the Professional Handlers' Association and was a founder of the AKC registered handler program. Now, Vroom teaches novice handlers how to show dogs in his "Corky Vroom Seminars: Learn to Beat the Pros." For information, contact Vroom at 940/497.4500 or by email at cvroom@charter.net.

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