

Arm's Length or Hands On?

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A breeder-acquaintance of mine happens to be a glamorous and successful attorney. The dogs she breeds, however, are decidedly less glamorous and less successful. In her professional life, she is unaccustomed to asking for advice and sadly, is no more inclined to seek mentoring when it comes to her dogs. Showing a competitive breed that draws large entries on both coasts, her dogs simply don't cut it.

Tired of losing, she recently developed some interest in an AKC-recognized rare breed. She imported several top-quality specimens, put them out with a handler and is now enjoying the wins that eluded her in her first breed. She has become a big fish in a little pond. "I decided to view my path in dogs the way I viewed making partner in my law firm," she explains dispassionately.

Well, that's one way to get ahead in the dog game – the arm's-length approach. But I'm not sure she'll be around five years from now. She reminds me of the parents who buy a finished champion for their kid to enter in Junior Showmanship, a dog that could make any Joe Schmo off the street look like a skilled professional. You hold the leash and collect the first-place ribbon. It's an efficient way to cover your walls with glory but where's the pleasure in it? And what are you learning?

If you're trying to convince a breeder you are serious about dogs and in our sport for the long haul – not just passing through – I want to see your willingness to take the third-best puppy in a consistent litter and learn on it. Train it, groom it, trim it, show it and make your mistakes on it. Put a championship on it if the breeder considers it finishable.

While you're at it, join your local all-breed kennel club, along with your regional and national breed clubs. Volunteer to work on a few committees and find out what it takes to put on a dog show. That will impress breeders.

When the time comes that you're ready for a second or third dog, you will have earned the respect that will get you the second-best puppy in the litter, or the pick of the litter – or perhaps a co-ownership on a promising young adult dog that is already out and winning.

As breeders, we've all met the blowhards who promise us the moon, only to decide – after a few weekends of getting their butts kicked – that dog shows aren't fun and they'd rather be golfing, sailing or bungee jumping. Oh, and by the way, without consulting us, they've gone and spayed/neutered their dog. And they wonder why we didn't sell them the best we had ... the breathtaking show puppy we're keeping that it's taken us 20 years to produce.

Every dog endures its share of losses. Instead of sulking and badmouthing the competition, smart novices work on their handling and grooming to make a better impression next time.

It's the hands-on approach that is the mark of a serious player. Good breeders look for that dedication and will always encourage and reward it.

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