

Building a Show Dog's Confidence

Handling classes can expose your dog to the show ring and let you try different stimuli.

By Allan Reznik

Q. How do I get my dog to be more confident in the ring? As soon as we walk out, he is happy. In the ring, he acts like he doesn't want to be there and will not focus on me.

A. You didn't mention what breed of dog you own, what age he is now, and how old he was when you got him.

Some breeds are naturally more laidback than others. They'll get excited when they're out tracking or lure coursing or herding a flock of sheep, but they don't feel the same enthusiasm performing in a show ring. For dogs such as these, you've got to find the right buttons to push. Your challenge is to make them enjoy the experience and convince them it was their idea.

Handling classes are an excellent way to expose your dog to the protocol of a dog show, while having the time to try different stimuli – chicken, liver, a squeaky toy – and evaluate the effectiveness of each. You'll also have the benefit of input from other breeders, owners, and instructors. All their troubleshooting may help find the key that unlocks your dog's inner showman.

Your dog's age is significant because a well-socialized puppy is easier to motivate than an adult dog that's been raised in a kennel without show training and one-on-one attention. However, it's not impossible. Again, handling classes are a great resource.

If you think your dog may be responding to your own anxiety, try having a professional handler work with him and see if there is an improvement.

Finally, you must determine how important showmanship is in your breed. A Poodle or Doberman without a showy attitude won't get far in the ring whereas there is less demand on a Schipperke or an English Toy Spaniel to exude the glamour of a runway model.