

## The Benefits of Breed-Handling Classes

**Breed-handling classes teach skills to you and your puppy.**

*By Anne H. Bowes*

I strongly believe that if you're serious about exhibiting dogs you never outgrow your need for breed-handling classes. When you begin in conformation, you attend classes to learn the techniques necessary to show your dog. As you gain experience, handling classes are where you train your up-and-coming puppies.

The place to decide whether you and your dog are ready for competition is at handling class, not in the show ring. Work out the kinks in class, and your time in the ring will be more fruitful.

### Choose a class

It's important to choose your handling class wisely. If you're lucky, you will have several choices within driving distance from your home. Before you attend a class, visit it without your dog to assess the building where the classes will be held.

Most classes are held in buildings with high ceilings, which can make classes noisy. That's fine, though, because dog shows are noisy affairs. You do want to avoid loud overhead heaters or air conditioners, as well as other sudden noises that may scare a puppy.

Make sure the building is large enough for the classes being held, and for dogs and handlers waiting for their class to begin. Look for mirrors on the walls. There should be at least two, so you can see how you and your dog would look from a judge's point of view.

Check on the size of the classes, too. Breed-handling classes that allow more than 15 dogs at a time are useless because you and your dog will not have enough ring time.

Puppies, especially small breeds, should never have bad experiences with larger dogs in handling classes because it may diminish their enthusiasm for the breed ring. Be alert when you're in the company of large dogs, and pick up your small dog if one approaches. I don't recommend exposing your puppy to groups of dogs until it is 4 months old and has received all of its puppy vaccinations, especially distemper, parvovirus and Bordetella.

Finally, ask about the experience level and accomplishments of the person teaching the class. The best handling-class teachers are professional handlers with a lot of experience showing different breeds, or licensed judges who know how to run a ring. The more experienced and successful your teacher is, the more information she can offer the class.

### Improve your techniques

Dog showing is a sport, and like any sport, there are skills to acquire. These include:  
Holding the lead  
Gaiting your dog correctly around the ring with other dogs present  
Executing the various individual gaiting patterns that a judge may call for  
Presenting your dog to the judge at the end of your individual gaiting pattern  
Hand stacking your dog (using your hands to place each of the dog's feet so that it stands in the desired position)  
Standing your dog for the judge's examination  
Baiting (how and when to use a treat to get your dog to perk up and stand at attention)  
Free stacking (walking the dog into the desired position by use of bait and leash, without hands)

It's best if you learn these skills with an older, trained dog and not with your new show puppy. Take an older dog to class along with your puppy. If you don't have a more experienced dog of your own, borrow one from a friend or from your breeder. Work that dog for the first half of the class, then switch dogs and teach the puppy what you learned on the older dog.

### Develop a game plan

Handling class is the perfect place to develop a game plan for each dog you're showing. Every dog is different, and handling tactics will vary to enhance each dog's strength, whether it's structure, movement or another aspect.

For example, one dog may need to go away (trot away in a straight line) from the judge slowly to enhance its rear movement; another may need to move faster. A dog with a beautiful head and expression that plants its front feet down straight should be brought back to the judge head-on; a dog with a side outline that's better than its headpiece or front should be turned sideways to the judge.

#### Timing is everything

Like so many things in life, timing is everything in the show ring. Many handling classes go much slower than an actual show because the teacher often stops to explain things or to have someone repeat an exercise.

When in an actual show ring, you will find that it all goes very quickly. Sometimes it's over before you even know what happened. Try to choose a class that gives students the experience of a true ring situation, either through the class itself or by holding informal handling competitions or matches.

#### Handling seminars

Take advantage of handling seminars, which are held throughout the country by professional handlers and owner-handlers. Often, these seminars take place over an entire weekend and afford participants a real immersion in the art of showing dogs. Seminar activities range from lectures on handling to classes and practice competitions.

A listing of seminars can be found on the American Kennel Club website. It's important for anyone learning how to handle a dog to learn as many points of view as possible.

#### Form your own class

If you can't find a local handling class to attend on a weekly basis, try creating one yourself. Contact other exhibitors in your area and see who is interested in forming a class. Hopefully, you'll find an experienced exhibitor who is willing to teach the class. If all else fails, you and the other exhibitors could take turns running the class.

Local churches and municipal buildings might be willing to rent out rooms large enough to hold a small class. Once you have a location, find or purchase ring gates, mats and two mirrors, and you're in business.

Weekly handling classes are so important to your dog-show success that they are well worth the time and effort, even if you have to put on the class yourself.

Anne H. Bowes has been an owner-breeder-handler of Pembroke Welsh Corgis since 1968. She is an AKC judge for four breeds and Junior Showmanship, and was awarded AKC Herding Group Breeder of the Year in 2007.