

Is Your Dog Ring Ready?

Before taking your dog to the next conformation show, be sure you've done your part to train, condition, and groom him.

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Many exhibitors believe wins are within the sole realm of the judge. This is far from the truth. It may appear that the exhibitor plays a passive role in the decision-making, but his responsibility in what occurs beforehand is vital to the outcome.

At an average show a judge devotes around two minutes to each dog of the day's entry, which is not a lot of time to navigate through bad grooming and bad handling or to project what a dog might look like were it not so obese or terrified.

It is, of course, the judge's job to find the best dog in the class and reward it accordingly. The best dog is the dog that not only adheres closest to the demands of the standard but also is physically fit and performing in an observable manner. There is nothing more disappointing than having a dog in one's ring that could and should be a winner but is so poorly presented that it is impossible to reward him.

First place is closely contested in many entries. That is, two dogs balance each other out to the point that either could win. (E.g., "dog A" excels in one area but falls short in another while "dog B" excels in the area that "dog A" falls short in but may lack some of "dog A's" strengths.)

In situations like this, much of the deciding factor lies in the hands of the exhibitor. Condition and training can play an enormous part. Here, the professional handler may have an advantage because he will obviously show the dog in the string that is most ready to be shown. On the other hand, the owner-handler shows the dog he has. Therefore, the amateur must present his dog in a manner that is competitive.

Conditioning

Those who show coated breeds may be the guiltiest of showing out-of-condition dogs. It takes extreme care to grow the coats that some breeds are shown in. So much care that the feet of some of these dogs rarely touch ground. The coats are in magnificent condition, but under all the hair, there's a pile of mush: no muscle and no muscle tone.

Some coated breeds fall into the Working or Herding groups, and it is implied that the dog must be fit enough to do its job. Properly toned muscles and well-developed body capacity help a dog move in the prescribed manner. Pretty as that Pom may be, she won't win with cow hocks, or an inability to control her front!

What does the judge do when the typical Pointer feels like it is made of sponge and the dog behind it – while a bit less in overall quality – is fit and ready to step out into the field?

Conditioning does not end in the doggie gym. A show dog has to be accustomed to all conditions that occur at a dog show. A sudden noise can spook a dog for a moment, but the dog must be able to recover and assume the character dictated by its standard.

A merry temperament on home grounds does not translate into a dog's readiness to be shown. Dogs know they are safe in their environment so there is no need to be apprehensive. For the inexperienced dog, that sense of security does not exist in strange locations – particularly not in huge buildings where every bark and dropped chair echoes wildly.

At competitions, amidst an overwhelming number of strangers, the dog is asked to walk on a surface that he's never experienced before. Should the judge overlook the fact that one Great Dane refuses to budge while the competition moves in the prescribed manner? Give the new dog, especially the new puppy, time to adjust and feel secure with its new humans before dragging it off to a puppy match or show.

You may know the puppy you bred will blossom into a rose of perfection, but don't expect a judge to ignore the fact that young Bowser is currently walking around with his rear up several inches above the level of his shoulders or sporting a coat that is like spun silk but should be like a Brillo pad. Not all judges have lived through the developmental stages of every breed they judge.

Grooming and trimming

For some breeds it is perfectly fine to show a dog in the state that resembles an unmade bed. In that case all the competitors start off on equal footing at least with respect to presentation. There are other breeds, such as Poodles and Cockers, for which you had better learn to use a pair of scissors or you might as well hang up your show lead.

These are a few examples of the breeds where perfection in presentation is as much a part of the winning picture as is conforming to the written standard. The professionals who ready these breeds for the ring are artists, as are the winning amateurs who compete. Only when there are no other viable choices will the judge consider putting up badly done exhibits. You wouldn't expect a judge to put up a poor-moving Borzoi even if the dog were moving badly due to its handler's inability to gait the dog properly. Neither should you expect to have your dog considered for first place when it is presented in less than a winning manner and condition.

The judge has the power to say, "one, two, three, and four," but the exhibitor plays a very significant part in how the judge arrives at those placements. A good dog deserves a sporting chance and it is up to the exhibitor to give his dog that chance.

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