

Let Your Dog Shine in the Show Ring

Finesse your dog's faults to win at the next big show.

Richard ("Rick") G. Beauchamp

"All dogs have faults. The great ones just carry them well." My mentor, the late Beatrice Godsol, gave me this piece of advice early on as I began to pursue my interest in judging. I have never forgotten it, and time and experience themselves have proven that truer words have probably never been spoken.

Something else I've learned over the years that I would add to Mrs. Godsol's statement is that the talented exhibitor becomes expert by never allowing those faults or failings to be seen or, if seen at all, obscured by the dog's quality. I am not talking about faking, illegal procedures, or disqualifying faults. I am talking about presenting a dog so well that the dog's qualities stand out, not the things that anyone knowledgeable about the breed would like to change. The handler allows the dog to carry its faults well.

Of course it is up to judges to know where a dog is not right or could be better. But at the same time, a judge does not have an entire afternoon to poke, prod and mull over where a dog just could be wrong.

There are some faults that even the best presentation cannot hide. Lacking type (in my mind, the most serious fault a dog can have) cannot be hidden from the practiced eye. Other faults, however, can be made to all but disappear or blend into the overall picture of quality so well that they become inconsequential. It is up to the exhibitor to make that happen.

Exhibitors fail to understand that if a fault is never revealed to the judge, as far as the judge is concerned, the fault does not exist. For instance, a dog may have an east-west front but never reveal that fault in the ring. The handler may have learned exactly how to stack the dog so that the fault does not show. He may even have figured out what to do so that the problem does not reveal itself while the dog stands on its own or even when it moves.

Case in point

The reverse can be true as well. A dog can appear to have faults that may or may not really exist. This occurred recently when judging a very large Best of Breed class of one of the Working breeds. Quality was high and I knew that the year's top winners in the breed were competing.

The show came at the end of the year and was probably the third or fourth in a consecutive series. Everyone was tired: the dogs, the handlers and even some of the judges.

About midway through the class, I looked back down the line at the dogs I had already gone over. Two of the dogs that were in strong consideration were among them. Unfortunately one of the two, "Dog A," stood there with a dip in his back I was admittedly shocked to see. The handler of the dog was deeply engaged in conversation with another exhibitor. He paid no attention to the fact that I was observing his dog in the most unflattering stance it could possibly have assumed.

A few dogs down, a bitch was lying down but in a semi-alert state – head up, ears at attention. The handler of "Dog B" quickly noticed that I was taking inventory and immediately brought her dog to its feet. Without laying a hand on her dog, she brought it into full stack – a perfect silhouette of the breed.

No matter how often I looked back down the line, "Dog B" was the picture of perfection, the other totally belying the quality it actually had. In truth, there were things "Dog A" had that gave him an edge over the bitch, but until the handler got busy and really began to work on making his dog look good, the picture was not there.

On the other hand, the bitch presented the picture of perfection every second she was in the ring. Perhaps she gave just a bit to the dog, but neither she nor her handler allowed that to be of concern. She was stunning – faultless despite whatever faults she may have had.

Was it my task to factor in how many shows there had been on the circuit or the fact that I had seen the male I was considering in much better form elsewhere and at another time? Or was it my responsibility to put up the best dog in the class there before me at the given moment?

The Breed went to the bitch. The dog – a good one, mind you – was Opposite. The scenario illustrated some lessons for anyone who shows a dog.

Always alert

It is never acceptable to allow one's dog to look like anything less than a winner when it is in the show ring. A dog doesn't need to be posed standing like a statue for the entire time it is in the ring. On the contrary, a dog can be relaxed, even lying down. The handler can be at ease but must be constantly aware that at any second, the presiding judge may glance back down the line. The judge may not be looking to see your dog specifically, but he will see your dog, too, as well as all its good, bad, and neutral qualities.

A good dog can be made to look bad, and although a bad dog can never really be made to look good, a lesser-quality dog can be made to overshadow all of its flaws.

I have had the good fortune of knowing many of our outstanding handlers over the years but none, in my opinion, have matched the gifted Bobbie Fisher. Most people showing dogs know him as a Field Representative for the American Kennel Club. However, prior to his taking on that position, Fisher was one of the most talented professional handlers that ever took a dog into the ring.

His attitude and his hands on a dog were all but mesmerizing. While watching him, you felt that the dog he was showing was nothing but the best, not just in the ring at that moment but anywhere, ever (even when you knew better).

Richard ("Rick") G. Beauchamp is the author of numerous breed and all-breed books, including Solving the Mysteries of Breed Type and Breeding Dogs for Dummies.

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