

Purchasing a Show Puppy

Choosing your first conformation puppy takes research, interviewing and patience.

Anne H. Bowes

If you want to exhibit show dogs, your first step is to obtain a puppy that is an excellent representative of its breed and has a “show” personality – an outgoing and energetic demeanor that draws attention.

Dog showing is one of the few sports that I know of where amateurs and professionals compete head-to-head. Except in a very few instances (which we will go into in a later column), you will always be showing your dog in direct competition with dogs shown by handlers who make their livelihood from this sport. It's a difficult task whatever level of experience you have, but it's especially tough when you're first starting out. The better the quality of your dog and the more your dog loves to show, the more successful you will be in the ring.

Start with the standard

You have chosen the breed you want to show; now you must acquire a thorough understanding of the standard for that breed. The breed standard is an attempt on the part of experienced breeders to describe the most important aspects of type and quality of the breed. Read your breed's standard over and over until you have it practically memorized. Most breed clubs publish educational materials with added comments from experienced breeders and exhibitors in an effort to explain the standard. If your breed club offers seminars for judges or breeders, plan to attend. These seminars will afford you the opportunity to talk with breeders and to examine good examples of your breed.

Do your homework

Purchase as many newsletters and handbooks on your breed as possible. Hopefully, your breed club publishes such resources, which contain photos and pedigrees of Champion dogs from the major breeding programs. On the Internet, visit and research the websites of as many breeders as possible. Study photos and pedigrees of the dogs that most closely represent the picture in your mind of the ideal example of your breed as described in the breed standard. Eventually, you should start to find similarities in the pedigrees of the dogs whose photos appeal to you.

Visit dog shows

Go to as many specialty shows for your breed as possible. Specialties are shows that feature only one breed, and are usually judged by experienced breeders. The national breed club holds the national specialty. This show attracts the top breeders and top dogs from all over the United States and from other countries, as well. At these events, talk with successful breeders to learn their ideas about breeding and selling show puppies.

Visit breeders

By now, you should have narrowed your choice of breeders down to two or three. If possible, visit the homes and kennels of these breeders so you can meet them and their dogs in a relaxed setting. This will give you time to ask the breeders questions about your breed and their particular breeding program. The breeder will be able to get to know you, too.

Look for dogs that are not only beautiful and meet your criteria for what the breed should look like, but also have stable temperaments that are correct for their breed. Keep in mind that overly shy dogs do not usually fare well in the conformation ring.

Purchase a puppy

After studying your breed, you should be able to refine your choice of breeders down to just one. Discuss with this breeder exactly what you are looking for. Mention the dogs of theirs that you have seen and why you like them. Be patient and spend whatever time and money it takes to get a quality dog with the attributes you are seeking.

With most breeds, it's best to buy a show puppy that's between 5 and 6 months old so you can more accurately evaluate conformation, coat, dentition and that all-important show attitude. However, in some breeds, top-quality puppies exhibit features that are more obvious at a younger age; this all depends on the breed you are working with.

It's often easier to buy a male of higher quality than it is to buy a high-quality bitch, particularly if you are relatively new to the breed. It's also usually easier to win with a male because most breeders want to keep and show bitches, and therefore the competition in bitches is usually much keener. An outstanding male will afford you an opportunity to demonstrate your seriousness about the sport to breeders, who then may be more willing to part with a good bitch for you in the future if you

decide to get into breeding dogs yourself.

Find a mentor

When you are starting out in the sport of dogs, it's extremely helpful to have a mentor. This person should have at least 20 years of experience, and be a successful breeder, owner-handler or both. Your mentor may or may not be the person from whom you have purchased your show puppy, but he should be objective about your abilities and the quality of the dog you hope to show.

Ideally, you will find a mentor you can visit frequently and who may even travel with you to shows. The American Kennel Club and the United Kennel Club recognize the importance of mentors and can provide you with a list of experienced handlers and breeders in your area who are interested in helping newcomers.

On your way

I still remember the excitement I felt when I purchased my first show puppy so long ago. I was eager to start learning about my new sport, but just having a beautifully bred puppy in my life was thrilling. After 40 years of exhibiting my dogs, I still get excited about showing a new puppy. Enjoy your puppy and realize that it's the product of years of planning and hard work. Your new puppy is also your ticket to the best sport in the world.

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.