

Dog Shows: Stack and Attention

The whole country is watching. Are you doing it right?

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With more and more dog shows on television, we have time to watch not only dogs, but also their handlers. I've been taping the shows so I can go back and study how people handle different breeds. While viewing one recorded Terrier group, it took me back to a moment a few years ago, when I sat next to dog trainer Gary Wilkes at Westminster Kennel Club while groups were being judged. Gary was one of the first disciples of Karen Pryor, the author of *Don't Shoot the Dog!* and inventor of clicker training. Gary had given a seminar with Karen Pryor a few weeks before the Garden and his skill at shaping the behavior of puppies while we in the audience watched made our mouths drop open. Gary has a private practice in animal behavior and training in Phoenix and lectures internationally, so I wondered what he was thinking as he leaned forward in his seat to watch the Terriers being stacked. I elbowed him and whispered, Are you enjoying the show? When he turned to answer, he shook his head in amazement. These people are terrible dog trainers, he replied. Go right down the line almost every one of them is rewarding the dog for doing the wrong thing. This was Westminster, so some of the handlers were icons of our sport. As Gary explained what he saw, he opened my eyes. Watch what happens, he said, pointing to one team. The dog is posing, holding his position, doing everything right. At that moment, the dog was gazing intently at the handler's hand, which he knew contained a bit of liver. Suddenly, the dog broke its stack and what did the handler do? Handed him the treat. Did you see that? Gary asked. He rewarded the dog for moving! Now the handler had one hand free to set the dog up again. After he did so, he picked another bit of liver out of his jacket pocket and hid it in his fist. The same scenario went on all night. Gary drew my attention to another pair. Sure enough, as soon as that dog moved, the handler first gave him the treat, and then restacked him. The dogs have trained the people to give the treats when they decide, said Gary. Things were topsy-turvy. As I watched the taped dog show, my thoughts went back to Gary Wilkes and his ideas for training. I spoke to him by phone and email from his Phoenix home. Q. Why do the dogs hold their stacks for so long, when they know the handlers will reward them when they break? A. The dogs pick up on any signal that consistently precedes the reward.