

Owner Handler Advice

as listed on American Canine Exhibitor
Promoting Owner Handling of Quality Show Dogs
Compiled by JP Yousha of Chromadane
Edited by Publisher, Penny Mikeman

INTRODUCTION: It goes without saying that the Owner Handler is the backbone of the sport of purebred dogs. After all, Owner Handlers (OH's) represent the everyday person who is the bread and butter of the sport of dogs. Their ranks are filled with conscientious and patient breeders who bring their carefully crafted puppies to be exhibited as well as the hopeful and studious owners who bring their precious purchases to the ring. Yet they are often thought of (by themselves as much as anyone else) as second class citizens. Sentiments like "if you'd put that dog on a handler, you'd be able to finish him," and "he'd finish if I'd just put him on a handler," are heard entirely too often. The majority of OH's should be able to take a good dog, adequately handled into the ring and win.

Certainly the professional has the advantage crafting their skills with many different dogs each week. OH's have less time in the ring than the pros and it often shows. OH's can be their own worst enemies. OH's lack more than "pull", they can lack professionalism and finesse. We as OH's lose for our dogs or we hamper their chances in the ring when a thorough understanding of the basics is not employed upon ring entry. Since we must compete against our professional counterparts, we must have adequate skills to succeed. Complaining about the pros will never get a dog finished. Perhaps with some of the following tips from judges, professional handlers and seasoned owner-handlers we can be more competitive more often.

LEARN FROM THE PROS: "Local handling classes are great for socializing your dog and practice, however to learn those tricks the [pro] handlers use, you need to learn from a professional." Go early and stay late and watch the pros at work- especially in the group rings. "Good handlers have a reason for everything they do". Here [at shows] are free classes for you in handling - sign up by planning to watch other breeds and the groups and the juniors to can be teachers to the new owner handler. Attend a seminar put on by a top handler. Assist a handler at their job for a weekend or even a circuit. Hire one to show you just how your dog is supposed to be groomed and presented. Be a steward and work for the judges. Not only will you learn a lot about your judge *de jour* you'll learn a lot about ring procedure.

DOES NOT UNDERSTAND RING PROCEDURE: "Nothing irritates a judge more [than] to have someone [be] clueless about where and how to stack their dog and where to move their dog." This is a very typical comment and a very legitimate complaint. Why should the judge care enough to put up your dog, when you don't care enough to learn how he/she wants his/her ring run? Unless you are in your very first show, you have no excuse. Perhaps maybe not even then: shouldn't we learn about basic ring procedure before we step in the ring? (If not, then is it fair to expect to win?) The pros know the judges and how they want their ring ordered and this makes the judging easier; the judge can then concentrate on the dogs being shown to them, not the handlers needing the extra help. So help the judge find your dog by being more invisible. Show up early enough to watch enough of that judge's ring to know how they want the dogs moved and stacked. Watch carefully and try to make life a little easier for your judge. A smile and some easy grace may go a long way towards making a favorable impression.

DRESSING INAPPROPRIATELY: "While every breed ring is different, an owner-handler has to really do it right." dress neatly and professionally. After all, the judge has come in a coat and tie usually if a male, and a dress/suit of some kind if a woman. Shouldn't you "come to the party" similarly attired? "Pretend like every dog show is a job interview." Now that is a great one-liner to remember. Jeans, cut-offs and casual shorts

and slacks generally stand out, and not in a favorable way, even at a small outdoor show. Fussy clothes and excessive jewelry are not only distracting but can be dangerous. Outrageous or odd-ball clothes may draw attention away from your dog unless you have enough cachet to carry them off, and too short skirts can be a disaster. Men often keep too many jangling keys, change and other oddments in their pant pockets, which are a jingly distraction. Wear shoes you can gait your dog in, but that doesn't mean you need to tog out hiking boots; wear something comfortable but suitable to your outfit and the outing.

BRINGING A DOG IN POOR CONDITION: If he is not even properly groomed how can he be treated as a serious exhibit? For heaven's sake, bring your dog to the ring clean and well groomed and in the proper trim so people will believe you know the nuts and bolts of the breed. Dogs cannot always be in perfect coat or in full bloom and bursting with perfect vivacity and vitality, but we can admit what we have to work with today. If your dog is obviously out of coat or out of condition and that is more obvious than the dog's overall quality, then keep him at home until his virtues outweigh his shortcomings to the objective eye. Many owner handlers do not have the knowledge or experience to groom their dogs like the professionals. Learn from a pro how the job is to get done. Pay someone to learn if you have to. And don't overlook conditioning or the basics either. Fat, flabby dogs are not in "show weight"! Long nails are a pet peeve among many breeders and many more judges. It's bad for the feet and it is just poor grooming to boot. Don't expect a sympathetic response from strangers to a dog you know is NOT quite right. Fix it before you show up ringside and if you need an objective opinion or some help, find it and when you find it take it. "Owner handlers too often don't know the value of pre-show preparation."

FIDGET, FUSS AND FIDDLE: Novices just cannot quit stacking their dogs! Stop. Less is more when it comes to handling. Too much fussing, for example with an "east-west" dog that shouldn't be. Let the dog alone to look his best whenever possible, and when helping him use smooth unobtrusive movements to correct his stack. Admire him yourself while in the ring. Relax: this gives the dog the confidence to unkink his muscles and to pull himself up. A happy handler has a better presented dog. All of us have seen the effect a frowning, fussing or obviously out-of-sorts handler has on the dog, the judge and the audience and themselves. It's a show-so act a little if you have to: show people what a wonderful time you are having with a wonderful dog who charmingly stacks and gaits himself to advantage.

IGNORING THE JUDGE: Your dog starts off with at least one strike against it if you manage to irritate the judge before he/she even gets to look at your dog. Be ready ringside. Know when your class is coming up, have your armband, leash, bait and all else you need to walk in ready to show. "I have seen too many people pulled out by a judge, only the exhibitor does not see it and keeps fiddling their dog." He/She were winning and still missing our chance. Keeping one eye on the judge at all times is as important as keeping one eye on your dog. Again, this is more than good tactics it is common courtesy. You are in their ring with your dog and you should be making it easy for the judge to favorably view your dog. He/She shouldn't have to concentrate on helping you do your job. "[Have] your dog already set up when the judge turns to it; don't make the judge have to instruct you to get your dog in place, etc". Pay attention to where the judge is looking; even when you are nervous. Expect to win; expect to be pulled out and be ready for it!

LOSING COMPOSURE: Your obvious nervousness will scream Novice while it also is being transferred to your dog. So pretend like you have it all under control even when you don't. It will not only help your handling it will help your dog. Concealing your nerves will also keep the judge from focusing on you and your obviously novice status. After all, it is the dog that you brought to be looked at. Also this includes getting intimidated by judges and other exhibitors. Keep your cool. You've paid your way in and have just as much right to receive courtesy as to offer it. Know the rules and know the customs. Knowledge calms the nerves. If you cannot gain experience at the speed of a pro, with a bit of study you can catch up with what they learn "on the job".

WATCH FOR RING MOVEMENT: Ringside folks will literally scream the person's name to have them move out. Delaying the ring movement will at least aggravate the other handlers (your peers) very much likened to running up on another dog which is also a no-no. Move your dog while watching where the others are and knowing where the stops and start are to achieve a fluid look as well as not impede others who are trying to do the same job you are. When it comes time to move your dog with the others let the person in front of you take a few steps out. This gives plenty of room to show your own dog and allows for the following space in case the ones in front must stop or slow. Know the CORRECT gait for your breed and practice it so you can show your dog to its best advantage. Almost all judges HATE the racing around that so many exhibitors are doing these days. So don't feel rushed and don't rush around the rings. Sing a song with good cadence (silently of course) and move your dog at his best pace to offer the judge a picture of the dog's best performance.

DOES NOT KNOW A JUDGE'S PREFERENCE: How can they expect to win when they take a straight dog with a good head to a judge who is a fanatic about good angles and balance and will forgive a lesser head, but never lack of angles? There were a variety of comments offered in the same vein. The pros know by weekend trial and error with several dogs what the judge is looking for in his ring. The pro takes the right dog to the right judge and thus increases his chances of winning. The owner-handler normally has only a few dogs to show and novices often show them to anyone and everyone (in any condition and at any age). A little homework and some networking can correct these mistakes. Collect dog fancy magazines and study the winners pictured. Note their virtues and how they are consistent under certain judges. Take careful and honest notes about the winners for each judge you are under and look for the pattern. Exchange your experiences with other owner-handlers. Join "Judging the Judges" and other such archival formats to be able to enhance your experience without having to take 12 dogs to a whole panel of judges each weekend (which may go a long way to explain why the pros have the advantage over the novice). For each of us alone to acquire the ring experience of a pro would take more than the one lifetime we each have so we must strategize to make up the deficient we have in ring experience. The pros know the judges' predilections and preferences. We can too: with a little work and help from each other we can end up taking the right dog at the right age and stage in the right competition to the right judge.

KNOW WHAT YOU ARE SHOWING: Being objective about your dog goes a long way to improving your chances of winning. Know his faults and how bad they are and how to minimize them. Know his virtues and strengths and how to pour them on. Know your competition and learn to cast a cool eye over whom is out there and who could beat you. Then set yourself in motion to exhibit your dog so he is the most winning package out here that day. He doesn't have to be perfect but this is not the time to focus on his faults. Recall how he has looked his best in the past; how he's convinced others he is a good one and set out to make him look that way today. Right now.

SHOW GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP: [Some] could do every last thing wrong from start to finish and still blame their loss on good old politics, it's maddening! Be a good sport even if it hurts. Don't grouse ringside and don't run down other dogs or other handlers (at least until you are in the safety of your own van or the arms of your loving family). Having a chip on your shoulder won't get you the points. So it's unfair -- life's unfair. Analyze why you lost and resolve to correct the problem. Treat each day as a learning experience and then learning as something you did win. Plan to fix your mistakes and plan to win next time as a result. Be a pleasant person people are looking forward to seeing in and out of the ring. Be hungry for wins but don't be a ravenous wolf ringside - win or lose.

KEEP YOUR PRIORITIES IN CHECK/ORDER: Don't use the bad behavior of others as an excuse to indulge your own worse instincts. Pettiness may win a show or two but it cannot enhance your career as an owner-

handler. It certainly does not put the breed first by pushing so hard for the 'career' of your dog you forget the 'dog' comes before the show and the breed comes before the dog. Don't show at the expense of your dog or your breed, keep a check on the ego on your end of the lead as it can have a bad habit of taking over what you began as fun for you and your dogs. Remember dog shows are first and foremost a gathering of interested parties; a sort of "professional conference" where peers can exchange ideas make future plans and reassess their own stock by having the opportunity to see that of others. Even if a few people are always whispering that winning is everything and the only thing it is obviously not in dog shows even if they are in a competition of sorts. no win was ever as important as the bigger goals of preserving, protecting and promoting the breed(s) and the sport you love.

CONCLUSION: This is (or at least should be) a middle class sport in which the average exhibitor with a good dog, proper preparation and a little work can successfully compete. It should be a great joy to bring to the ring that special dog you have bought or bred. We cannot change the judges' preferences and most of us do not breed enough dogs (or enough styles of dog) to suit every judge. We cannot always choose our competition but we can know our judges, our shows, our circuits and our sites and ring procedures. We must choose our shows wisely, study up, **vote with our entries** and conserve our modest funds to put us in the right place on the right day with the right dog. We cannot gain experience at the rate other pros do so we must make sure we are not defeating our own good dogs' chances with our lack of skills and we must use every (legitimate) advantage we can find. We can work a little harder for our dogs. After all they are certainly worth it! We can take away every legitimate excuse for not putting up an owner-handler by a little study and a little determination. **We can make the BBE the glory it should be!** We cannot likely ever level the playing field in all respects but that does not mean we have to give up or give in. There are always excellent owner handlers out there who are deservedly winning with their good dogs. Many of us just need a little boost and a bit of polish to be there too. This is the sport that we love and we should take command of ourselves and be a force to be reckoned with. To do that we have our work cut out for us! But remember we too have advantages we can make work for us. Owner handlers have a big advantage over a professional handler as they have a bond with their dog that a professional can never achieve; your dog will perform for you better in that respect. So we can bring to the ring a more secure partnership and should be able then to get a more able performance from our partner. Of course we also get to take them home with us that is itself is a noble privilege. And this wonderful bond is where we all judge, handlers the rest begin and end with when it comes to dogs. We work this hard because we believe that they are worth it and more.

JP Yousha of Chromadane in Midland, TX is a breeder/owner handler of Multi-Championed harlequin Great Danes. JP's danes are seen across the USA in every type of competition imaginable and they are WINNING!

Penny Mikeman founded American Canine Exhibitor in 2000 in the hopes of bringing the OH a more balanced look at our playing field. Penny says seeing is believing and when you find others with the same aspirations as yourself in the sport of dogs, it is inspiring and uplifting to know it (championing dogs OH'd) can be done. Penny is a breeder/owner handler of Multi-Championed Fawn & Brindle Great Danes. Penny's danes are shown under the prefix Dagmar.