

Published April 2011

A Humbling Experience

Years ago, I entered a puppy from my first litter at a local show, to launch her show career. The sport of purebred dogs was a new and exciting activity for which neither my puppy nor I were totally prepared. We both arrived wide eyed; she was wiggling with delight, and I was quaking at the prospect of entering the show ring.

On the advice of several mentors, I picked a show with a judge who was known to love having puppies in his ring. My apprehension went into full-blown, head over heels panic when I saw a posted sign that there was a last minute judge change. Our new judge was none other than Mrs. Anne Rogers Clark.

I may have been “green” to the sport, but I knew enough to realize I was about to show to a person of great stature. First, there was physical stature – she stood almost six feet tall, but secondly, Mrs. Clark was one of the premier judges in the sport of dogs. “Premier”? More than that; absolutely lofty. She was the first woman professional handler to win Best in Show at Westminster, and then she did it two more times. When she retired from handling and became an all-breed judge, she was the only person to judge Best in Show and all seven groups at Westminster.

And there I stood with my almost-out-of-control puppy, about to enter *her* ring.

The butterflies that had only been in my stomach now permeated my entire body. I was a nervous wreck, weak in the knees, and praying for a merciful deliverance that never came.

The puppy class of one was called, and we entered the ring. I couldn't even look at the judge but rather busily attempted to stack my puppy.

A commanding, authoritative voice came from far above, “Don't set up, take her around.”

I wobbled on knees that had turned to jelly and my puppy gaited.

So far, so good, but then I needed to stack her and keep her still for examination. It was a total disaster. The more I tried, the more the puppy thrashed. I found myself reciting the mantra, “Stay...stay...stay.”

Then in that same serious, authoritative voice, I heard Mrs. Clark say, ““To tell a Weimaraner puppy to stand still is like telling a waterfall not to flow.”

Now, if this were a corny Hollywood movie script, my puppy would have gone on to win the points. However, in reality she won her class of one, behaved reasonably in Winners class, collected no other ribbons, and had a positive show experience. We had a judge who immediately recognized the limitations of the animal and the exhibitor and did nothing that was negative. There was no wrestling to get the puppy to stand still, no lecturing of the novice handler. We went away, single ribbon in hand, determined to try it again.

No matter how skillful the handler, showing a puppy can be a most humbling experience. My advice is to take the attitude that you have to start someplace and remember to keep things in perspective.

Your primary goal should be to positively introduce your puppy to a new activity. You may be expecting controlled behavior from a little critter, who has minimal self control, so don't be surprised if things go a bit awry. Even handlers with years of experience have to be prepared for the occasional episode of being made a fool of by some six-month-old canine twerp.

Keep it light, keep it fun, and you'll get two things. First, you'll get positive learning for your puppy; second, you'll get some great stories that start with, "You won't believe what my puppy did to me...."

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