

Of the five essential conformation show-judging qualities discussed by Anna Katherine Nicholas, condition is the one quality over which the owner has most control and ultimate responsibility. Nicholas defines condition as well-being. She asserts: "A dog in top condition carries exactly the right amount of flesh, being neither fat nor miserably thin. His eyes are bright, clear and sparkling. His coat is full, healthy and shows good care."¹ According to George Alston, "Level of fitness is usually what separates the Best-in-Show dogs from the also rans."²

How can one determine whether a dog has excess fat? While palpating the rib cage and the loin, one should be able to feel the bones of the vertebrae and ribs under the skin. How can one judge whether a dog is fit? Stand behind the dog and, with your right hand, push on the outside of the dog's right hind leg, thereby causing the dog's center of gravity to shift to the left leg. The muscles should be firm and well-defined. Repeat this process for the other leg.³

Good condition means as hard as a rock. Some dogs are that way naturally and some have to work at it. Dogs that are not normally active need some help in exercising, but no dog should be given any involuntary exercise until it is two years of age or older.⁴ All dogs need to be shown in hard flesh, even the Toy breeds. When the judge physically examines a dog he does not want to feel flab. A judge must feel that the dog is in firm condition. Proper exercise will stimulate the circulation as well as help hair growth.

When you begin exercising the dog, whether jogging with you on a lead or putting it on a trotter (though many top handlers believe that use of a trotter often leads to a short, choppy gait), do it only until the dog begins to labor, then quit, whether it's a mile or 100 feet. If a dog is forced beyond its comfortable endurance, muscles that compensate will eventually turn into bad habits in movement. Your dog will take these learned negative patterns into the show ring and they will be practically impossible to break. Build up the dog's endurance gradually so that it can do more and more, but always at its own pace. Walking is better exercise than galloping. If you are doing roadwork, either behind a car or bicycle or on a trotter, it should be done every other day. It takes twenty-four hours for the muscles that are injured to recuperate.⁵

Jogging with your dog can help a sloppily moving dog tighten up or enable the basically correct moving dog to develop a gait that is smooth, fully extended, and animated. Done incorrectly, however, jogging can actually cause a show dog more harm than good. Therefore, the most important factors to consider are: not to run the dog too many miles or train on a surface or at a speed that could inhibit movement. Also, never run a show dog downhill, as this causes the dog to restrict his reach and can cause other movement problems. Running uphill may cause both of you to pant a little more but can benefit a show dog by strengthening a weak rear or developing rear drive.

The speed at which a show dog jogs can cause improper movement in the ring, so try to run at a speed that encourages the dog to move out freely, reaching and driving to full extension. Never allow a dog to run so slowly that he switches to a pace or moves in a choppy, restricted gait. Dogs with correct angulation, and, therefore, a longer stride will trot faster than ones with steeper angulation and more restricted reach. If the dog is running so fast that it breaks into a gallop, slow down so that the dog reverts to a fully extended trot. Pat Craige, the top-winning owner-handler of the Vin-Melca Norwegian elkhounds, in her recent lecture at the Berks County Kennel Club, remarked that she prefers long walks over jogging to maintain the fitness of her very athletic breed of dogs.

However, if a show dog is run properly and the mileage is kept to a reasonable level, the dog's gait should show significant improvement over a period of time, and he should be a pleasure to watch.⁶



A less common way of exercising. Handler, horse and dog must be well trained to avoid accidents. Some object to the use of the dog harness, feeling it impairs the action of the forequarters. photo from the Forsyth Guide to Successful Dog Showing, p 58.

References:

¹Nicholas, Anna Katherine, *The Nicholas Guide to Dog Judging*, Howell Book House, New York, p 22.

²Zink, Christine, *Coaching the Canine Athlete*, *AKC Gazette*, Feb 95, p 36.

³Ibid., p 36.

⁴Alston, George G. and Vanacore, Connie, *The Winning Edge*, Howell Book House, New York, p 20.

⁵Ibid., p 22.

⁶Gallup, Davia Anne, *Running with Man's Best Friend*, Alpine Pubs., Inc., Loveland, CO, p 33.