

Of the five essentials that the dog show judge must consider in evaluating a show dog, style is probably the most difficult to describe in words. Yet it is the most obvious quality that can be discerned by both novice and professional alike when observing the dogs competing in the show ring.

Style results from a combination of balance, elegance of carriage, showmanship and personality. A stylish dog possesses an air of pride, eagerness and alertness which is extremely attractive and appealing.¹

The self confidence, poise and subdued dominance (manifested especially by the males but not uncommon among the bitches) expressed as an obvious sense of presence, what we might call “owning the territory,” goes a long way’ to attracting the eye of the judge in the show ring. Insofar as this characteristic is innate in the show dog, it is my impression that its foundation is largely hereditary. Often one can perceive this quality when observing the puppies in the litter box. One puppy will stand out shortly after the eyes are open and the littermates begin to challenge each other for their positions in the hierarchy. That puppy, if properly trained and socialized, will almost certainly continue to display an exceptional air of self assuredness throughout its life.

As with most hereditary characteristics, however, the manifestation of this quality depends to a great degree on training and presentation. The dog must know, almost as a matter of second nature, exactly what it is expected to do in the show ring. This requires that the handler at a very early stage of the puppy’s life demonstrate exactly what is required in the way of stacking and gaiting. The training sessions, of course, must be short and playful, and the puppy must be rewarded for good performance. Early exhibition at match shows will build on this confidence if the puppy can be made to enjoy the experience. Do not hesitate to ask the judge to be excused from the ring (even at point shows) if the weather or other factors seem to be having a negative impact on the puppy .

As the dog matures and the show ring skills improve so that he will gait and set up properly, there is no need to rehearse him at it every two or three days, or even the day before a show. To do so is to push him to the point of boredom, which may never be overcome.²

According to George Alston, one of the most successful of the professional dog show handlers, you should make every effort to “find your dog’s buttons.” Try out different things to see what makes him respond. If he likes to be scratched behind the ears, then, if you want him to do something, give him a little scratch and a little encouragement. Finding a dog’s buttons may happen right away, or it may take months. Sometimes it happens by accident. Maybe bait will work, maybe a squeaky toy, maybe scratching under the chin.³

Finally, though the dog may have all the qualities and stylishness to make it a top contender, the handler must also have a positive mental attitude. Your own psychic energy translates itself to the dog and fosters greater energy in the dog. The two of you as a team will fuel one another so that you both will feel better, look better and project a better image to the judge. When you enter the ring, you must mentally condition yourself to win whatever the odds you believe may be encountered. In this way you always perform at the peak of your ability. Stage fright or nerves must be avoided at all costs. Animals sense this and will not perform well with a nervous person at the other end of the lead.

When preparing the dog for the ring and during the grooming process, use the time to mentally prepare your dog. Assess your dog’s mental attitude and your own feelings on the day. If your dog is up too high, use the time to relax him. If you are both down and not alert, gradually try to increase your own enthusiasm level, so that by the time the dog is ready to come off the table and go into the ring, you are both up and showing.⁴ If both you and your dog are mentally prepared, your dog has his best chance of displaying his best qualities and the style that will attract the judge’s attention to put him in the running as a top contender.



CH. King’s Creek Triple Threat, top beagle shown in the 60s. A classic and very stylish dog, multiple Best in Show, sire of 90 champions. photo from Nicholas, p. 70.

References:

¹Nicholas, Anna Katherine, *The Nicholas Guide to Dog Judging*, 3rd Edition, Howell Book House, New York, 1989, p 22.

²Forsyth, Robert and Forsyth, Jane, *Successful Dog Showing*, Howell Book House, New York, 1988, p 75.

³Alston, George G. and Vanacore, Connie, *The Winning Edge*, Howell Book House, New York, 1992, p 22.

⁴Alston, *op. cit.*, p 101.