

# BECOMING A BETTER OWNER-HANDLER

By Christi McDonald

**I**n the conformation side of our sport, some people spend a lifetime handling their own dogs but never really progress past a fairly basic level. Others become very successful as owner-handlers, often winning as much as or more than the typical professional handler.

What makes the difference between the two extremes? Having a natural talent for grooming and handling dogs certainly will help anyone become proficient at the craft, but there are a number of things you can do to improve your chances of becoming successful as an owner-handler. If you're already having

a certain amount of success, perhaps some of these ideas will help you elevate your game. You'll notice that all of these suggestions have one thing in common: they require an investment of time. Almost any endeavor in life, whether a hobby or profession, requires a significant investment of time if the participant hopes to become successful at it, and showing your own dogs is no different. You'll notice as you read along that a number of these points end up intertwining with one another.

- Know your breed standard. Although this may seem obvious or overly elemen-



Taking the time to observe other owner-handlers as well as successful professional handlers in the ring will allow you to pick up tips for improving your own handling. There is more than one "right" way to do most things, so observing a variety of people will increase what you'll learn.

tary, more than one judge has recently expressed the opinion that many exhibitors today, even those who are breeder-exhibitors, don't seem to really know the quality, or the assets and faults, of the dogs they're showing. Although we sometimes hear owner-handlers lament that "the professional handlers always win," you should never assume that you're being beaten by a professional handler simply because he or she is a handler, if you don't know your breed standard well enough to legitimately and fairly compare your dog to what the professional handlers are showing. A good handler typically knows not only the good and bad points of the dog at the end of his own lead, but of the one at the end of your lead as well. If you know your dog's good points, you can present it to the judge in a manner than highlights those assets. Similarly, when you know where your dog is lacking, you can present that dog in a manner than downplays its weaknesses.

“*Becoming the best owner-handler you can be takes a lot of effort and no small amount of time.*”

self about your best opportunity to be a successful owner-handler.

they are structurally correct and minimize where they could be improved. (More on this later.) Some may consider this trying to "fool" the judge about the quality of the dog you're showing, but the truth is that if you don't educate yourself so that you know your dog's assets and weaknesses, you are just fooling your-

(It goes without saying that to be the best possible breeder it is essential to know your breed standard and canine structure.)

- Build strong relationships. Much of your success in dogs will depend on the relationships you develop and maintain in the sport. Not everyone is lucky enough to grow up in dogs like I did, but even if you did grow up in dogs, there is much to learn from those who have had success in your breed.

Identify a breeder you admire, preferably one in your area, but if you have to travel a couple of hours to get to the person in your breed that you most admire, the likelihood is that the investment of time will pay off in spades. Breeders who have successful show and breeding stock typically keep a number of dogs. Anyone who keeps numbers of dogs always finds that there is more to do than there are hours in a day, and even on the rare occasion when they've gotten "caught up" on grooming and training chores, there is always extra attention that could be lavished on the dogs. Volunteer your time; go spend an afternoon or a half day on a weekend when they're not at a show. Offer to help bathe the retired show dogs or give a few dogs a good brushing, or to help clip toenails and trim feet and ears. If there are puppies around, offer to help lead train them. If you've chosen someone who has

- Know structure. As with breed-specific requirements called for by the breed standard, you must learn basic canine structure in order to bring out the best in your dog. You can't properly evaluate the quality of the dog that might beat you if you don't really know structure.

There are so many people showing dogs who think they know what they're doing, and they may know enough to go in the ring with their dogs and win points and even to finish dogs, but they haven't taken the time to really study structure and movement. When you've developed a good understanding of these two key aspects of evaluating dogs, you will discover that there are ways to both present and to groom your dogs that will enhance where

had success in the breed, while you're there you'll likely get to put your hands on some very good dogs.

Years ago I was fortunate to get to go to Betty Marcum's Cairmar kennel now and then. On those visits, all at one time I got to see and could put my hands on the Best in Show winner Ch. Cairmar Call To Arms, the top sires Ch. Cairmar Scot Free, Ch. Cairmar Devil's Advocate and Ch. Whetstone Halston, as well as top producing bitches, English import bitches, young hopefuls and sometimes puppies. There were plenty of dogs at Cairmar so that I could make myself useful by putting a dog on a table and giving it a good brushing or bath, nipping its toenails or maybe cleaning its ears, all while talking to her about dogs, and not only was I doing a small favor for Betty, but I got to spend time with dogs whose quality was unparalleled. I could ask questions about individual dogs, about how she bred in a particular quality or any number



Developing a relationship with a successful owner-handler can elevate your own performance in the ring in many ways. Cathy Nelson is an owner-handler who has shown her Dandie Dinmont Terriers to major wins for decades, including a Group First at Westminster in 1993 with Ch. Pennywise The Butler Did It. Photo Backstage – Leslie Simis.

of things that helped me learn more about my breed, and in doing so I benefitted from the experience of someone who bred more than 100 champions. A person could spend a lifetime in dogs and not get to put their hands on that many dogs of that quality, but if you'll make the effort to develop a relationship with a breeder of that caliber, spending time with her (or him) will be invaluable. Volunteering your services is one of the optimum ways to learn about dogs and to spend time with people who have been very successful in your breed.

And not only will you learn about the breed itself, you'll may also pick up tips about trimming and caring for dogs in general. There is an education in being exposed to a veteran breeders and how they put their hands on dogs, how they set up and examine dogs, and how they evaluate puppies, and over time the more we're exposed to these actions, the more they can become second nature to us. All these things build your store of knowledge about dogs and about your own breed.

- By the same token, many professional handlers will allow you to hang around their kennel or their setup at a dog show if you're willing to pitch in and help. Just as with successful breeders, there's always plenty to do in the professional handler's world. This can be a brilliant way to learn all kinds of things about grooming, taking care of and showing dogs. I've been told that many owner-handlers consider professional handlers the "enemy," but let me assure you that most professional handlers are not the enemy... and they can in fact become your best teachers.

Develop a relationship with a professional handler in your area that you admire. If you're willing to pitch in and help around the setup at a show, or to go to their kennel and bathe dogs, brush dogs or pull hair off a dog, they'll likely be more than willing to teach you a few

things. Just being in that environment, you're likely to pick up lots of tips about how to care for and groom dogs. Be prepared to work! You don't just get to hang around and ask questions and expect a lecture on how to trim and train Terriers. Seldom is there a professional handler who has lots of idle time to spend with someone who just wants to take advantage of their experience, but if you're willing to get in there and work, it becomes worthwhile for the handler to spend time sharing his knowledge with you. And not only can it be great fun, the best way to "learn dogs" is by doing.

Always remember that this is what the professional handlers do for a living, and most of them are not only devoted to their own clients and the dogs they show, they're also devoted to the sport at large, and they want good people to come into the sport and remain interested. They also enjoy strong competition.

If you're smart you'll develop relationships with two or three handlers, and then if one of them isn't at a show where you are, another one will be. The other great advantage to being friends and working with more than one handler is that different handlers trim, train and handle differently – remember that there is always more than one "right way" to do almost anything – and being exposed to different methods is good experience. Helping them out will give you something to do at the shows when you're not in the ring with your own dog. Once you've developed relationships with a few handlers and with breeders you



Watching respected judges as they examine dogs and place their classes is a valuable way to further your education in dogs. Many successful breeders and exhibitors learned a great deal from watching the late Anne Rogers Clark judge dogs. Take advantage of the opportunity to carefully observe judges of this caliber whenever you can.

admire, you'll have another set of eyes at the dog show, someone you can ask about how your dog looked in the ring, or what they think about how your dogs stacks up against the competition. It's always useful to hear another opinion about how your dog looks in the ring.

- Stay at the dog show. When you're finished showing your dog, don't pack your things and go home or to the hotel. Don't just watch your own breed – watch other breeds as well. In any hobby you can get such tunnel vision if you focus only on one very narrow aspect, and you're not likely to develop as much knowledge about your hobby as you will if you expand your mind. In life, it's a good thing to expand your mind, and the same

applies to dogs. One of the most successful Poodle people in the world is Chako Kitai of the North Well Chako Poodle kennel in Japan, who has bred hundreds of champions. In 2004 a Toy Poodle she bred, Ch. North Well Chako JP Platina King, was Top Dog of All Breeds in the U.S., handled by Tim Brazier. During his show career, Chako made trips to the U.S. on occasion to watch him be shown. One of the intriguing things about Chako is that she didn't limit her interest at the dog show to watching Poodles; she intently watched judging of lots of different

breeds – from German Shepherds and Airedales to Chinese Shar Pei, Pekingese, Wire Fox Terriers and Bull Terriers. Like many people who have been very successful in dogs, she is genuinely interested in dogs of all breeds, and this interest has really helped her become a top notch dog person. You don't have to be interested in every breed, but observing judging of breeds other than your own will certainly broaden your dog experience.

Anyone can sit at ringside and watch other people show dogs, but really getting something out of the experience is another thing entirely.

Pay attention to how the handlers you most admire – whether a breeder/owner-handler or a professional – interact with their dogs, how

they put their hands on their dogs, how they manage a dog that is unruly or a puppy that isn't completely trained. The majority of dogs that go to a professional handler to be shown aren't necessarily perfectly trained show dogs. You can get lots of ideas about how to manage and handle dogs from watching how veteran owner-handlers and professional handlers interact with the dogs they're showing.

- Don't just make assumptions about the judges. Owner-handlers sometimes get the idea that certain judges put up only professional handlers. This is seldom really the case. Experienced exhibitors and handlers are able to win more readily under some judges not because they know them personally, but often because they've shown dogs enough times to those judges to know what they're looking for in a certain breed, what they might place most emphasis on, or what charac-

teristics those judges will not "give" on. Some judges want soundness first; some judges will forgive soundness for a dog with a beautiful head or the ideal proportion. Other judges want overall balance and might be willing to sacrifice the finer details of breed type. Often by watching judges time and again – and of course by showing to certain judges time and again – you can begin to learn about the criteria they seem to emphasize when choosing their winners.

One of the best examples of this is a judge whom I've shown to since I was fairly young in

dogs. Today I do in fact know Edd Bivin personally, but more importantly, having shown dogs to him for several decades, I know that if I am going

to show a Cairn to him I want to take him a dog that is within the size recommendations in the breed standard, one that has a correct broad, wedge-shaped head, and one that has the proper Cairn temperament and will show on a loose lead. If I was currently showing a dog that was on the large side, perhaps with a great coat but, say, not as strong in head, I would not expect to win with that Cairn under Mr. Bivin. I will only win under him if I bring him the kind of Cairn Terrier that he likes, based on his interpretation of the breed standard. However, there are certainly other judges who feel that coat texture is of the utmost importance in the breed, who prefer a different style of head and who would like my larger, very hard-coated dog. That would be the most likely reason that I seemingly often win under the judges that I "know" – because I have learned what kind of dogs they typically prefer and I do my best to show that to them. Some judges prefer soundness, some

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like a certain head type, some will forgive a dog that isn't the best show dog if it is of ideal type, and some want only dogs of a certain size. Some judges never award points to the Puppy Class winner, some might give preference to Bred-by-Exhibitor, some judges have a heavier hand when judging, and some will not penalize a Terrier that doesn't behave perfectly. By watching and learning about certain judges, you might be able to save yourself

a hefty entry fee the next time they come up doing your breed if you've taken the time to figure out something about what they're preferences are.

And as mentioned with the successful breeder, watching how respected veteran judges examine dogs, how they put their hands on dogs and what they emphasize in their judging, is an education in itself. You can learn a lot about your own breed by watching a well respected veteran judge do a large entry, and you can learn a lot about dogs in general from watching that same judge do a large entry in almost any breed.

- Take your handling and your grooming to the next level. Invest in a mirror to put on the wall where you typically groom your dogs and you'll never regret it. Trimming in front of a mirror gives you a perspec-



You should always know how your dog looks moving on a lead before you go in the ring with it, so that you can both trim and present it to its best advantage. Owner-handler David Smith has had success with his Bedlington Terriers.

tive that you simply can't get any other way. Similarly, if you've never set your dog up in front of a mirror, how do you know what it looks like in the ring when you set it up for the judge to examine it?

I have to assume that before you ever started showing a given dog you've watched it move on a lead so that you know how it comes at

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you, how it goes away, and what it looks like moving from the side. But every time you trim a coated dog you potentially alter how it looks on the move; therefore, every time you do any major trimming, you then need to have someone move the dog for you on a lead, so you can see its topline, its front and its rear and make any necessary adjustments. If you aren't in the habit of doing this, you'll likely be surprised to find that a dog in motion on the ground can look quite different from the

one you groomed on the table. And a dog running around your back yard won't look quite the same as he will on a lead. It's always best to have someone walk the dog up and down and in a circle for you after you've finished a grooming session.

As mentioned earlier, you should learn to trim your dog to his best advantage as well. In some cases this may mean learning "corrective trimming," which is just a fancy way of saying that you want to manipulate the coat to minimize your dog's weaker points. If your dog moves a little close behind, has a dip in its topline or a bump in front of its tail, is a little short on leg or long in back, learn to minimize these faults or draw attention away from them with grooming.

Even if you have a smooth-coated dog, you want to have someone move your dog for you periodically, both because it will let you know what his strengths and weaknesses are on the move and so that you can present him to his best advantage as well. Again, it's about maximizing assets and minimizing his faults. Determine at what speed he looks best when moving, whether his topline on the go-around looks a little better when he moves faster, or perhaps he moves more correctly in the rear at a slower pace. If my dog doesn't always stop true on his front, then I know it's probably better to stop with his profile facing the judge at the end of the down and back instead of with his front facing the judge. By the same token, if my dog has a particularly beautiful front or a gorgeous face, I want to present that detail to the judge after he's watched my dog move on individual examination.

And when you're in the ring with your dog, always remember that it's up to you to give your dog its best shot. Make sure your dog

always looks its best, even when it's someone else's turn for individual examination. You don't want to wear your dog out by expecting it to be at maximum attention every second, but be aware of how she looks all the time so that if the judge happens to glance in your direction he'll see an attractive representative of the breed.

- Don't be afraid to ask questions... and never stop learning. The day that you think you've got it all mastered is the day that your career as an owner-handler will begin to go downhill. I've been in dogs all my life, but I still have those "light bulb moments" when a question of structure that I've been wondering about suddenly becomes crystal clear, or when

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I discover a new way to work with a dog that yields a better result. And even if a question seems too dumb to ask, ask it.

There are lots of topics in dogs, from interpreting a breed standard to puzzling questions about structure, that others wonder about just as you might. There really are very few questions that are "too dumb" to ask, so find someone who has experience in that area and ask away. (Be sure you ask at an appropriate time.) People who are successful in our dog sport like to talk about dogs. You'll probably start a dialogue that everyone involved will learn from.

Becoming the best owner-handler you can be takes a lot of effort and no small amount of time. But not only is the satisfaction you'll get from winning with your dogs well worth the effort, the process itself is fun and rewarding. Following any one of these suggestions will help you elevate your performance as an owner-handler. •