

How to be a successful owner handler by Tiffanie Coe

As many of us embark as owner handlers in the AKC, there are a few points to keep in mind: 1) Yes, we are owner handlers & we should be proud of it. 2) We should always enter the ring with confidence. Approach each opportunity with the mindset that you are the best handler and you have the best dog. 3) We have the luxury of knowing our dog inside and out.

The above have helped me be successful as an owner handler. Do I always have the best dog in the ring, "No." Am I always the best handler in the ring, "No." Every time I step foot in the ring, I try to be confident, temper my nerves, and always show my dog to the best of my ability. I also never stop showing my dog. Does that mean I keep my dog stacked 100% of the time. No, that would not be fair to the dog. It just means that if I allow my dog to relax, I still want my dog to look presentable. Judges are always looking around the ring. They glance out of the corner of their eyes, they see you in the background during the down and back of another dog, they glance up to survey the ring.

Every dog is different. Every dog needs to be handled differently. For example, my Grand Champion bitch has fantastic reach and drive, she moves out quickly, and has an amazing head. My champion male is a slower mover, but has great angulation. I handle each dog differently so that their strengths are presented to the judge.

Every time you enter the ring, you should have realistic goals and stretch goals. Realistic goals could be as simple as having fun with a baby puppy, or setting my dog up so that it does not move during the judges exam. A stretch goal could be a specific placement, earning points, or gaining a title.

One thing that attracts me to dog showing is that you never know what is going to happen. Each time you enter the show ring, your placement is based on one person's opinion at that given moment. I have shown enough in that some of my dogs have been shown under the same judge more than once. In some instances my dog was put up, in others; it was not.

To best prepare for a dog show, you must study your dog. You must know what your dog's strengths and weaknesses are. If you cannot be honest about your dog, you should not be showing. Every dog has strengths and every dog has weaknesses. If you do not know your dog, you cannot present it in the best way to the judge. What makes professional handlers so good? They know the details about the dogs they are showing. They know the tricks to fix crabbing in the ring. They know how to quickly fix and eastie / westie front end. If the dog is a young puppy and cannot stretch out the rear, they will line the dog up $\frac{3}{4}$ to the judge to give the illusion of a well set rear. We owner handlers can do the same thing.

Keeping the dogs entertained in the ring is also very important. We need expression, we need to have our dogs up on their toes, we need to have dogs that look like they

want to show. Bring toys into the ring, teach your dog simple tricks such as “touch” or “Paw,” and bring a variety of treats or bait into the ring.

Learning the basics of dog showing from a great handling instructor is also very important. You can read books, you can practice at home, but getting professional training lays an excellent foundation for future success. I have driven 2 hours one way to take handling classes because it was important to me to lay a solid foundation. Keep in mind that each dog is different, you will need to handle them differently and present them differently. A collar and lead that worked for one dog may not work for the next. Arm placement, speed, bait, tricks, toys, won't work for all dogs. You will need to experiment in training class to see what works for your dog. It is great to get ideas, but in the end; you know your dog the best.

Grooming....luckily with our breed they are to be shown in the natural state. This means we are only to trim paws. I'm a firm believer that the type of shampoo and conditioner really make a difference. You don't want the dog's coat weighed down with product, you don't want a dull coat, and you certainly do not want to enter the ring with a dirty dog. It takes time, dedication, and patience to get the best looking dog. I spend hours grooming before a dog show. I wash, I condition, I blow dry. I have a variety of grooming tools – different brushes for different parts of the dog – back, mane, ears, feathers. I have a variety of combs for ears, feathers, pants, etc. You need tools that are appropriate for your dog's coat. Some Leonbergers have longer coats than others. If your dog has a longer coat, you need brushes with longer bristles. If your dog has a shorter coat, you can get away with brushes that have shorter bristles. I allow my dogs to be dogs, but I do brush them daily. I do not brush a dry coat, so I always mist the dogs before brushing them because it helps to prevent breakage of the guard hairs. Make sure your dog does not have any knots in the coat when you enter the ring. Toe nails....it is so important to stay on top of nail trims. I prefer to dremel. I prefer short nails. I dremel every other day, yet I still feel my dogs' nails are too long. I'm working to get them shorter and I think short nails really help to make a neat & tidy foot. Some people prefer to clip nails. That is ok too. If you are going to clip, you should invest in high quality nail clippers and ensure they are sharp. If you have dull clippers you can actually cause more damage to your dogs' nails because instead of a clean cut, you will have a jagged cut. Teeth....don't forget to brush your dog's teeth on a regular basis. Keeping clean teeth will also help keep your dog healthy. Ears....yep, stay on top of your ear cleaning. Many times a judge will start looking at grooming if it is a close decision. The dog that is groomed the best may have the edge over an ungroomed dog if the judge feels everything else is equal.

Let's talk about show pictures. When does one get a picture? Some people get a picture for every win, others choose not to get pictures at all. My personal opinion is that I get a picture for the first show, the first point, and then every major win or new title after that. If there is competition and I win Best of Breed, I will have a picture taken within reason. I have had my share of terrible show photos. I have also had my share of amazing show photos.

I have to be honest, show entry fees, parking fees, gas, hotels, and pictures add up. Dog showing is expensive, but you can be successful if you do it correctly. Set a budget, set a travel distance, set a number of shows per month, etc. Coordinating with other Leonberger people to ensure entries help everyone earn points.

In addition, one needs to have a dog show wardrobe. Depending on the venue you are showing in, AKC, UKC, IABCA, ICKC, CKC, etc. each has a certain attire that is expected. Take a minute to observe the people that are the most successful in the ring. Most of the time those handlers whether professional or owner handler are very well put together. They have an outfit that compliments their dog or the dogs that they are showing that day. For example, if you are handling a white American Eskimo dog, do not wear a white suit. If you are handling a darker color Leonberger and you wear black, you need to ensure that your dog does not get lost against your black outfit.

Sportsmanship....this is so important. Our breed still has somewhat of a family atmosphere in that we tend to know everyone at the shows. While it is nice to win, sometimes it won't be your day and you must be gracious to the other winners. You have to ask yourself, did you really deserve to win or did the other person present their dog better? Losing can sting, but always congratulate the winner, thank the judge, and try to think about what you can improve upon before the next show. Sometimes dog shows can be hectic and thanking in person is not an option...an e-mail or facebook post can go a long way.

How does one improve? It is extremely helpful to study photographs and video. You may find out that you are doing something that throws your dog's gait off. You may see that your dog consistently turns its head, you may realize that you are setting your dog up incorrectly. Critiquing yourself can only make you better.

So, how does one get a good show picture? 1) You need to tell the photographer what you want. Do you want $\frac{3}{4}$ profile or complete profile? You need to know your dog in order to know what type of picture will look the best. 2) Practice setting your dog up in front of the mirror. What you see in the mirror is what will be displayed in the picture or what the judge will see in the ring. 3) Practice setting your dog up and having someone take pictures. You can also try different outfits on to see what looks the best with your dog. Different coat colors lend themselves to a different pallet of colors for your wardrobe. 4) Decide if you want mouth open, closed, or if you don't care. 5) Make sure that your lead is neat and tidy. The worst picture is when you have a sloppy lead. It takes the focus away from your dog. 6) Always have a spotter! I can be honest and say that I have a dog show photographer that I know and trust. When he sees me coming for a win picture, he knows exactly what I want. Why? Because I met with him. I showed him what I was looking for in my pictures. I told him my dogs' weaknesses and he knows how each of my dogs should be set up. He is honest and tells me what I need to fix in order to take a nice picture. It was not an overnight success, it took a couple of photos, but ever since we sat down and reviewed what I was looking for, I have not had a disappointing show photo under him. 7) YOU choose the photographer. If there are multiple photographers at a dog

show, you are the customer. You do not have to go with the first photographer that appears at the ring. I always request a certain photographer and I will wait until he is available to take the photo.

So, we have covered training, confidence, sportsmanship, grooming, attire, and photographs....what's next? The most important item of dog showing... HAVE FUN!!! If you are not having fun, your dog will not be having fun! Yes it is fun to win, yes it is fun to earn points, and yes it is fun to earn titles, but why do I show? I show because I absolutely LOVE being in the ring! I love showing dogs. I handle for friends because I love running in the ring. I prefer to handle my own dogs, but I also enjoy helping my friends and handling their dogs too. Am I a professional handler? Heck no! I handle dogs for other people free of charge. I show in a variety of venues and some do not allow professional handlers. Being able to handle in those venues and help people means more to me than any compensation for showing dogs other than my own. I've been offered payment and have politely declined every time. All I ask is that if I win with the dog, that we are allowed to get a win picture. Why? Because win pictures are important to owners, handlers, and breeders. It isn't just about that dog, but it serves to establish breeders that are breeding quality dogs, it is a way to recognize a dog's achievement, it will be a happy memory after the dog has crossed the bridge.

Dog showing can be fun, it can be frustrating, it can be rewarding, and it can make dreams come true! It will build an amazing relationship between you and your dog that is far more important than any point, title, or ribbon.

