

Pamela Isaacson - My story in the OH series

I had no idea what I was getting into. When we wound up with our boy as a 16 month old re-home, we were asked to "possibly show him." Having worked at shelters previously, I uttered the fateful words, "Sure! I've trained dogs before. How hard could that be?"

I was so wrong. Showing a dog is 20% training, and 80% everything else. I had no idea that people would spend hours grooming their dogs, especially when the standard practically yells "no alteration to the coat of any kind." I thought, "He's clean, he's brushed, and I'm listening to my conformation trainer. I should be ok!" Anyone who has ever gone to a dog show is laughing their heads off right now at my last statement.

Let me back up a bit.

What do you need to know as an owner handler? Rather a lot! There are the basics - what a dog show entails, how to groom a dog for the show ring, how to enter the right class and the right choice of judge, what happens in the ring, the proper tools: chain/lead/grooming tools/footwear(!), and an understanding of terminology that is unique to this sport. The most important tool in your toolbox: A good handling class teacher or breed mentor (usually two different people, but occasionally, they are the same person!) They can teach you many of these things that you need to start out in this wild world of showing dogs. No matter what, be prepared for awesome highs, and embarrassing lows, sometimes together in the same ten minutes.

As a person who had no knowledge of the sport, I was incredibly fortunate to wind up with an amazing conformation teacher. A good teacher will teach you how to stack, how to bait, and how to get around the ring without stepping on your dog or passing out from nerves. A GREAT teacher will explain what to do when these things eventually happen, and also, WHY people do strange things in the ring (and which ones to... um, borrow... for yourself!) My teacher is tough, will call you out if you're doing something silly, and -even better- tell you examples of dirty tricks you may see in the ring and how to work around them. "Dirty tricks? At a dog show?? Aren't these people all there because they love dogs?" you may ask. Trust me, as with any competition that includes accolades and pretty colored ribbons, this is a competition. There is rivalry, there are alliances, and there are dirty tricks. As much as I'd love to say that the cream will always rise to the top, I'd rather be realistic, and say, that there can be mean people in any sport, and if you want to show dogs, you need to have some thick skin. I strongly suggest that you sit through the movie "Best In Show" and at least two episodes of "Toddlers and Tiaras." No, I'm not trying to torture you, I'm just giving you some perspective. Some people will do anything to win, and some people will be flat out crazy, but there will also be some wonderful people tucked in as well. If you can't sit through two episodes of T&T, without hurting, then showing dogs will chew you up and spit you out in your first year. If you can get past that, you're in for an amazing and thrilling experience!

Back to the showing itself.

My conformation teacher, PW, can make you feel amazing with a hard -earned "well done!" and also have you in gales of laughter, when she talks about running into a column and being carried out of the ring, or being taken for a drag by a Saint Bernard. She can also explain how to visually correct the topline of a growing dog at an awkward stage, how to stop another handler from crowding your dog, and how to find your voice, know your standard, shop for show-appropriate suits, and remember to thank your steward. A great instructor is worth every penny and then some. As much as I'd like to hear "good job!" on a regular basis, I'd much rather hear PW tell me to put my feet together and shoulders back during the free stack, because I currently look like I'm squatting over a toilet. Guess who rarely forgets to paint that pretty final freestack picture with feet together?

When I started this crazy journey, I met TONS of people, all of whom seemed incredibly friendly and helpful. And many of them really were! Are there people who are helpful until you win? Yes. Are there people -even professional handlers- who will tell you that there is a better way to trim your Leo's feet, and take time from their own grooming work to do so? Absolutely! As with everything, you'll find some interesting people along the way, and you need to decide how you want to be remembered at the end of the day. Listen, watch, and learn every time you go to a show. WATCH the people you admire, and try to emulate them, and avoid habits of people you don't. LISTEN to what people say, and then form your own opinions (which may change as time goes on!) LEARN something new with every show, and then bring questions back to your teacher at the following week's class.



So... you still want to be an owner handler?

That's GREAT! It's the most amazing way to throw yourself into the show world, and learn from the ground up! It's also something special for you and your dog to do together, and a bonding experience like no other. The hours of practice, grooming, long drives, and nerves, the moments of triumph and disappointment, the excitement of getting that first point, that first ribbon, that first cheer, will have you hopelessly addicted for more. And that first time your dog decides to lie down and lick themselves in the ring?* Don't worry, it's happened, and eventually, you'll get to tell others about it as a learning experience as well!