

Short Primer for the new Owner Handler by Shannon White



The easiest way to start handling your own dog is probably an all-breed show, where there will be fewer Leonbergers present than there will likely be at a specialty. These all-breed shows may seem overwhelming when you first start showing, as they are often quite large, with hundreds or even thousands of dogs entered, representing the entire range of breeds. If possible, tag along with a friend who knows how to navigate through the apparent chaos and can help you get where you need to be on time. At some AKC shows, the hosting club may offer a workshop or overview for new exhibitors. But if those options are not available when you happen to get started, what follows is a general description of what you can expect.

When you enter an AKC show, you should receive an envelope in the mail about a week before the show, which will include your dog's armband number, what class he/ she is entered in. There will also be something called the Judging Program, which lists the ring times for all the breeds, broken down by breed ring number. You will want to arrive at the show grounds at least an hour before your scheduled ring time. Be prepared to pay for parking with cash, as many shows will require you to pay to get into the parking lot. You will need to check in at your breed's ring prior to ring time. That means you will need to find the ring and speak with the steward at the judge's table inside that ring. You may need to wait your turn, so it is important to allow enough time for that in your planning. You will not tell the steward your dog's name, but rather will ask for the armband by breed and catalog number listed in the confirmation of your entry.

Be aware what breeds may be ahead of your breed in that same ring. This is often posted outside the ring, but it will also be listed in the judging program you received prior to the show. The general wait time is approximately 2 minutes per dog, so if there are breeds ahead of your breed in that ring, and there are 15 dogs representing those breeds, you can expect your breed to be roughly 30 minutes after the ring judging starts. Your breed will not start until the other breeds ahead of you have gone. However, sometimes dogs that are entered do not show up, so it is possible your breed may not have much of a wait if some of those dogs do not show up. So keep an eye on what breed is in the ring, and if the other breeds are beginning to gather outside the ring.

If you can get to a handling class that is run like an actual ring, that will help you and your dog become familiar with what to expect in the show ring that day. Though there may be some variation from show to show with respect to the judge's preference for what they want to see in the ring, in general the usual format will be as follows. If possible, get to your ring before your breed is needed, so that you can watch the judge and see how he or she is doing things.

The dogs will be called in by class and in order by armband number. All the male classes will go first, followed by Winners Dog. Then the female classes will go, followed by Winners Bitch. And lastly, Best of Breed, which will include all champions and grand champions of record, the Winners Dog and Winners Bitch.

Either the steward or the judge will point to where they want you to line up. Some judges will give you a brief moment to organize your dog into a “stack” (standing still), and others will immediately give instructions for going “around” and where to set up. If you are not sure what the judge means, and there is nobody ahead of you to follow, it is okay to ask for clarification. Usually you will be instructed to trot your dog around the ring to the place indicated (typically near the ring gate where you came in). Setting up means to put your dog into a stand so that the judge can go over them.

Some judges will want you to show them the dog’s teeth, while others will prefer to check the teeth themselves. Your dog should already be familiar with both options! After the judge has gone over the dog, they will usually walk away a few steps and instruct you to take the dog “down and back” while pointing to where they want you to go. The purpose of this is to evaluate the dog’s movement, which helps the judge evaluate the dog’s structure. The dog should TROT (not gallop or walk) in as straight a line as you can manage. Again, having been in a handling class to help you practice this will go a long way toward helping you.

When you get back to the judge, let the dog come to a natural stand. At this point the judge will usually instruct you to take the dog on around to the end of the line. This allows the judge to evaluate the dog’s movement from the side, so the dog should trot along at your side and come to a stand at the end of the line.

The judge may rearrange the line up before sending the entire class around once more, or he may send everyone around and then point to the dogs in the order that he wants to place them. Either way, you should be paying attention to the judge.

If you win the class, stick around, as you will need to go back in for Winners. If you take second, stick around, as you may need to go back in the ring for Reserve if the dog who beat you in class takes Winners Dog. If you take third place or lower, you will not be needed to return to the ring.

What to wear? You can bet that any professional handlers in the ring will be wearing suit and tie (for the men) or skirt suits with pantyhose (for the women). Technically you could go in the ring in blue jeans and a t-shirt with sneakers. There is no rule that says you must wear a suit. However, those of us who dress up do it as a symbol of respect for the sport, and for the judge’s time and effort. If you are not able to wear a suit, anything that would fall under the heading of “business casual” would be fine, as long as it’s clean and in good repair. In theory, a judge worth their salt should be able to look past what you have on and choose the best dog. However, the reality is that if you are going to successfully compete with professional handlers, it is

important to show respect for the sport and for the judge by dressing in clean business-casual clothes.

Grooming. Your dog should be clean and thoroughly brushed. Our standard is very clear on the subject of no trimming other than neatening of the feet, but if you bring your dog into the ring, it should be clean and brushed. Professional groomers have learned grooming tricks to make cowlicks lie flat and to emphasize or de-emphasize a particular feature in the dogs they handle. For instance, if your teenage Leonberger is currently a little bit high in the rear, learning how to blow-dry the coat on his topline (the top of his body along his spine) can minimize the appearance of that until he grows some more and levels back out.

Training. While a very experienced expert in our breed could probably look past a lack of training in the ring and judge the dog appropriately, a little bit of training will go a long way toward allowing the judge to accurately evaluate your dog. The dog should be familiar with the process of having a stranger come up and look right in his face, open his mouth, and slide their hands through the fur to feel structure. Your dog should be familiar with you showing the teeth (including the sides) for those judges who prefer you show the teeth yourself. You should know how to do this as well. Your dog should know how to trot at an appropriate speed without jumping up on you, charging after the puppy in front of them, or trying to get the heck out of the ring. All of that comes from training. So train, train, train. A dog that never stands still, or cannot trot consistently around the ring cannot be evaluated properly by the judge, may lose to a lesser quality dog who merely behaved long enough for the judge to see them clearly.

While it is absolutely possible to successfully show and even campaign your own dog against professional handlers, you will definitely do better if you look clean and presentable in the ring yourself, and if your dog is familiar with the process and able to allow the judge to get a good look at them in the ring.