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Positively Stunning

Remember your first dog training class? You had the concept of positive reinforcement drummed into your head as the quintessential way to successfully train your dog. You learned the power of positive rewards to get a desired behavior.

It sounds so basic you're wondering why I'm even bothering to talk about positive reinforcement. We all know it works well and we use it to shape the actions of our dogs. We reward dogs with food and praise when they do what we want them to do. Gone is training by yanking on choke collars and yelling, "No," at the slightest infraction.

That's the theory, but it's amazing how we frail humans have lapses and forget this most basic tenet of dog training in times of self-absorption.

Let me tell you a little story.

I was judging a breed other than Weimaraners and was having a photo taken with one of the successful exhibitors. In the course of having the photo taken, I got into a short conversation with the handler. She is a stalwart of her breed, shows regularly and is regarded by her peers as a successful, dedicated member of the fancy. Making small talk, I remarked how happy her dogs always seem when I see them in the ring.

Little did I know that I had just touched her "hot button."

She emphatically told me that she makes sure that whether her dog wins or loses in the ring, she immediately fusses over them like they have just won Best in Show. The judge makes the placement and she immediately makes the experience of showing a happy one for her dog. First in line or last, she stressed that the dog needs to know that you are not disappointed with them if they do not win.

Sensing that the exhibitor felt very strongly about this, I was curious to see if she always practiced what she was preaching and if her behavior was different from that of other exhibitors.

The next day, when I was not judging, I went ringside and watched. Sure enough, she got the points on her class dog and made sure the dog knew he had just done something wonderful. It was a joyful, little celebration as the judge handed her the ribbon. It was not disruptive or "over the top" but there was good communication with her dog. In the bitch classes, things did not go as well. As she came up to the fourth place in line, the dog was praised and patted. There was no difference in how the handler interacted with her dog if she was standing in first or fourth.

What did the other handlers do as they waited for their ribbon? It was all over the map. A few gave good positive reinforcement, most were blasé and just stood at the placement markers ignoring their dogs.

Imagine this same scenario from the dogs' point of view. They perform as they were trained, they sense the excited adrenalin flow of their handler, they give their best and then...no feedback. Their human ignores them and doesn't let them know that they've just performed wonderfully. Sad.

This story started because I observed dogs that are always happy in the ring and they were a joy to see. Let's remember to give positive reinforcement to our canine partners when we're showing. If you do it's a "win-win" situation – the dogs deserve it and you'll have a better show dog.

Carole Lee Richards

zarasweimaraners@yahoo.com