

## ***Stack the Deck...in Your Favor***

As part of an AKC judge's education we are encouraged to attend sanctioned seminars and workshops. The American Kennel Club considers such attendance to be a vital part of a judge's development. The seminars are highly structured and have stringent requirements for the content. Seminars on individual breeds are conducted by parent-club representatives and cover everything from the history of the breed and its standard, to the nuances of judging the breed. Practical experience is provided by having a number of examples of the breed available to the students. Student-judges get to examine and rank the assembled dogs and then discuss why they placed the dogs in that order. Having a mix of theory and "hands-on" experience prepares them for future judging of that breed.

Last summer I had a chance to attend such training and without exception, each presenter included a snapshot of the overall quality of their breed and current "problems" in the breed. Repeatedly, the same areas were listed as needing improvement: "We'd like to see better shoulders"; "Heads could be improved"; and "We need to improve front and rear balance".

As I was typing up my notes from the seminars it struck me that it seemed that the same, recurrent structural woes showed up for many breeds. The long-range solutions to these problems need to be dealt with by breeders, but what effect do these seemingly universal problems have on the exhibitor presenting their dog in the show ring? The flippant answer and quick fix is, "Get yourself a better dog without the problems," but for the typical owner-handler this is rarely an option. We all tend to show what we have – not what we'd necessarily like to have.

Faced with this conundrum, how can you improve your chances of winning in the show ring with the dog you have? First, recognize that what you've got is what you've got. In our breed there are no magical grooming tricks – we show "naked" dogs with everything out there for the world to see. The hard, cold fact is: you can't change structure. But although you can't change the physical realities of less

than desirable shoulders, heads and balance, you CAN improve your chances of success by having a well-behaved dog. Never underestimate how important good behavior is in the show ring.

One of the most frustrating situations for judges is to have a good dog in the ring that is not properly prepared to be judged. It is impossible to evaluate gait when the dog is flaying about, dragging its handler or moving at an inappropriate speed. Judges are not detectives. They are not expected to ferret out hidden qualities nor does time permit for such analysis. When you enter a dog in a show it is called an “exhibit”. You as the handler are expected to exhibit the dog in a manner that is advantageous and which showcases your dog.

My personal advice to handlers is very simple. First, teach the dog to gait with you – no dragging or being dragged. Second, train the dog to move in a straight line – it’s the only way gait can be properly evaluated. Third, remember that baiting is NOT feeding the dog – baiting is training the dog to stand alertly waiting to be given the treat. Finally, since the stand for exam is very difficult for our friendly, curious dogs, teach it slowly and carefully. A few wiggles and wagging themselves out of place is fine – a wrestling match is not. One last thing...be forgiving but firm. Weimaraners know when you’re serious or when a behavior is optional.

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