

Where did I lose all those points?

Novice Handler – Novice Dog

By Sherrell Guichard–Thomas

For this article, I asked the Training Director from my obedience club, Joann Neal, for a few words of wisdom about those of us who have Novice dogs. She trains Miniature and Toy Poodles (don't hold that against her) for over 20 years and has OTCH, MACH and Tracking titles on most of them. She also writes a performance column for the Poodle Club of America newsletter. Lucky for us in Lubbock, Texas, she has a keen eye for what makes a dog and handler tick. Here's what Joann had to say:

Don't Look Back

Looking back at the dog causes the handler to be unable to walk a straight line. The handler will continually step into the dog, causing the dog to move farther and farther to the left to get out of the handler's way. Looking at the dog while heeling also causes the handler to step into the dog when halting, which teaches the dog to move away from the handler each time the handler halts.

Teach Heel Position. No Man–Handling

Novice handlers often fail to teach their dogs to get into heel position in order to start an exercise, and many "man-handle" the dog to force it to sit beside them to start an exercise. This can be the source of a major deduction. The rules state that the handler is not to touch the dog to position it except to gently lead it by the collar between exercises, or while standing the dog during the Stand for Exam.

Watch Your Speed

The handler is not to adjust their pace to that of the dog. There should be a clear difference among the handler's normal, slow, and fast pace.

Speak Up

Many beginning handlers do not practice in a volume and tone of voice that can be easily heard by the dog with the background noise of a show. The recall command is the one most often missed, as the handler is at the opposite end of the ring.

No Body English

No Body English--bowing and dipping as aids to the dog to start heeling, or on the recall; stomping the feet when halting. The beginner should get an experienced person to watch them and advise them if they are doing this, as they are often unaware that they are doing it.

Proofing

Most novices fail to "proof" the dog for common distractions found at dog shows. Distractions such as heeling and turning near ring gating and walls which may have wonderful doggie smells on them; food or food smells on the floor or ground; the judge following or walking beside the dog or handler; the judge standing behind the dog during the recall, and the noise and confusion outside the ring.

No Tight Leash

Keep as much slack as possible in the lead without interfering with the dog's movement. If the dog lags, it will get a deduction for the lag, but if the leash gets tight when the dog lags, then there is an additional deduction for a tight lead. So for minor lags, a leash held too closely can multiply penalties.

A few tips from me: I know the AKC Obedience Regulation Book is not Stephen King or Danielle Steele, but it's one of the necessary evils of the sport. You just have to read it. It can keep you from losing many points on some of the little things such as wearing the correct type of collar (no tags or attachments) and using the proper length of leash. Remember when returning to your dog on the stand for exam, make sure to return to heel position.

Another thing to do is work the first halt/sit in a heeling pattern. Work this a lot. You're nervous, the dog is in a new environment...and this is where a LOT of dogs lose points right off the bat. As we all know, every point we save keeps us from dipping below that precious 170.

Take care and Happy Heeling!