

Formulating a Strategy for Showing your Dog

by Jerry Bradshaw

President, Tarheel Canine Training, Inc.

PSA Director/Judge

One of the things I see when judging PSA trials, is that handlers get nervous when stepping on the field. Of course, this is normal, you want to do well, and you are relying not only on yourself, but also on your dog's performance. You want to do the exercises properly, and have a good result, no matter what the level in which you are showing.

The good news is, that as you train and progress, you will start to relax more when you are showing. People get nervous because of uncertainty, and when you are training and showing dogs there will always be a certain amount of uncertainty. That's what makes it exciting, right? But the key is to reduce the uncertainty, and that comes with preparation. I cannot stress enough, that proper training and preparation will allow you to feel confident on the field. This means that, you, as your dog's trainer, must know the strengths and weaknesses of your dog, and go on the field with a plan.

The plan begins in training and extends to showing. Predictable performance in training leads to predictable performance on the trial field. Dogs are creatures of habit, and if they do the things you want in training, they will do the things you want on the trial field. One of the biggest problems I see in handlers is that they do not trust their dog to be consistent, because they have experienced inconsistency in training, and that is a rational, even if an unwanted, expectation.

The Plan

Training must mimic showing. In training, if you get your dog out of the car, and let him drag you to the field, where you must correct him to get him under control each time you train, when the time comes to show, he will drag you to the field and begin out of control. The difference is, you don't have a training collar on your dog as you come onto the field. Preparation begins with routine, and routine leads to predictability, and consistency.

I always start from my van when training. Even if I am training at my house, where my dogs live in kennels, I first put on their training equipment, and put them in my van. The reason for this is, when showing at a trial, they will first come out of my van. This must be predictable to the dog. As soon as they come out of the van, I demand control, as I go to the break area. I release them to go break. Know your dog, and make sure he is completely empty before you go on the training field. Many dogs anticipate getting to the training field; they don't want to bother to go. You must train them that emptying is required prior to going to the field. If my dog won't go, he goes back in the van for a few minutes, then I try again, and until I get the result I want. My dogs, even if they have just done obedience, and are already empty, are required to make at least a reasonable attempt. Sometimes they cock their legs and nothing comes out! That is ok. They did what I want. Now again I demand obedience. Recall to heel position, and perhaps reward the behavior.

Next, I proceed toward the field, under control, heeling all the way. With training equipment on, I stop at a place (on deck area) and perform some control commands, like down and stay, sit and stay, and I fiddle with their collars and rewards. If your dog is collar-wise, put 2 collars on him and remove a dummy collar at the on deck area. Too many dogs feel the release of the collars, and think they have the license to go wild! I make it a habit to correct them automatically (but variably) as I take off to the field. I stop at the gate and demand obedience. They must wait there in calm heel position as I open the gate. Then proceed to my start position for training.

As I come off the field from a session, I stop at a place and train the critique under control. Nothing will sully a good performance more than having the dog lunging at the decoys after a nice bite work routine while the judge is trying to critique. After the critique I heel off the field, and heel all the way back to the car, making him sit under control before putting him back in the crate.

To my dog, obedience begins when coming out of the car, and ends when he jumps in the crate. My dog doesn't know he isn't judged when not on the field! But I demand performance as if he were being judged coming on and coming off. Most people lose control well before they get on the trial field. This routine makes the dog predictable, and makes his job predictable to him.

A Good Rule

The other issue in predictability of response is proper training. Here is one (of the many) basic rule of good training:

Never allow your dog to do something you don't want in training, and he won't do it in a trial. A corollary of this rule is: always be in a position to correct the dog, or reward the dog, given his behavior.

Consider this example: Your problem is that the dog breaks his long down and comes to you during the obedience routine of the other dog in Level 1. If you practice your long down, from the beginning of training with him back-tied to a post or tree, and you have another long line coming from the dog to you, he is fixed in place, can neither leave you nor come to you. You are not allowing him to make that mistake, and turn it into a conditioned reflex. In addition you are in a position to correct him if he gets up, and you can return to him occasionally to reward his down (with food) while he is in the position you want. If you do this consistently, he will expect never to move from that position, because it was never allowed, and was always rewarded for doing it. There is no reason for this creature of habit to change that habit!

The Handler's Role

Finally, what about the handler? The old adage goes, "if you are nervous it runs down the leash." While this is true to some extent, it is truer in dogs that are overly dependent on the handler. He looks to you for support, and if you break down, he breaks down. This is why I like to train my dogs to be independent. If he knows his job clearly, and your expectations have been clear in training, and he has performed over and over again to the same exacting standard in a program that gives him confidence and allows him independence, your nerves will affect him very little. But, that will have to be the subject of another discussion!

In the interim, try to learn and practice some relaxation exercises. Slow yourself down a little. Here is a simple relaxation exercise: Breathe in through the mouth and out through the nose (this prevents hyperventilation), slowly. When I show my dog, I always take 15 minutes before I take my dogs out, and sit in my car, and do breathing exercises. I put some soft classical music on the XM radio, and slowly breathe in for 3 seconds, and slowly breathe out for 3 seconds. I clear my mind, and consciously relax my muscles, from my face working all the way down my shoulders, arms, legs and feet. After about 10 minutes of this I am relaxed and clear headed. I then take 5 minutes to think about my strategy. Anyone who knows me will not approach my van during that time. This is my mental preparation time. Once my strategy is formulated, I again take a couple of minutes of relaxation breathing time, and then I go through my routine for getting my dog out (discussed above).

If your head is swimming with fear and negativity, you will not be able to handle your dog and make good decisions. Prepare both your dog, and yourself before you step on the field, with these simple routines, and see if they help you as much as they have helped me.

