



THE NEWBIE

By Axle Noden

We've all seen them at dog shows: the nervous people holding confused-looking dogs wearing big chain collars or cloth collars; the ones not sure how to get an armband; the handlers who walk into the ring and struggle to get their dogs to stack correctly when all the animal wants to do is to sit.

We've all seen the newbies, and not that long ago I WAS the newbie. Happily I had mentors in my Great Dane breed who made sure I avoided the really obvious errors, and who taught me handling and ring etiquette before I entered my first show. I still made a lot of my own mistakes! I even wrote a book about how to avoid looking as silly as I did in my early ring go-arounds.

At the beginning, I thought handling was simple: you walk your dog into the ring, you help him place his feet, and smile while the judge goes over him. Then you run him up and down and all around until the judge says stop. Easy, right? It sounded simple until I tried to do this myself. The first time my Dane Kunga and I went to handling class we created a circus all by ourselves. He was about seven months old and 100 pounds, large enough to be difficult to persuade to do anything he didn't want to do. Kunga danced sideways, he leaned on me, he backed up away from the collar, he turned in circles, he pulled his head sideways, and generally led me a jolly dance. I was embarrassed to have the worst behaved puppy in the class, although we certainly provided a lot of comic relief for the other students.

Even the simplest maneuvers were hard at the beginning. Somehow Kunga and I managed to murder the down-and-back. At first he wanted to run faster than I could, dragging me along behind like a kite. When I finally convinced him he had to wait for me, he bobbed and weaved back and forth. If I let the lead get too long, he would begin to pull away from me; if I yanked on him to get him back, he'd lean toward me, right into the path I was taking. The first time he did this, I took an entirely predictable header over the top of him, causing the whole handling class to "Ooooooh" in horrified delight as I hit the ground. I think everyone was just glad there was one dork in the class less coordinated than they were! We even had difficulty with the courtesy turn: Kunga nearly always spotted something behind the judge that he thought needed closer inspection. He would stop dead halfway through the turn, which I'd only realize after my arm jerked me to a stop as though I were a ship at anchor. This also provided some amusement to the other people in the handling class, since it usually had the effect of me reeling backward with a startled look on my face.

Baiting isn't as easy as it looks, either. It took some training to get Kunga interested in any kind of bait, and then it took a while to get myself trained on timing. He quickly figured out that I kept the treats in my right-hand pocket, and as soon as I reached for one on the move, he would unerringly swivel his head toward that pocket, right across my chest. This had the obvious disadvantage of bringing me to a full stop on the down and back, since a giant dog in search of treats can be surprisingly insistent that we concentrate on FOOD RIGHT NOW rather than this silly running back and forth.

Eventually I got good enough at all the elements of handling that I was able to take my dog into the ring without too many mistakes making us look like newbies. But I still appreciated the many handlers, professional and amateur, who gave me advice and pointers when I was messing up.

I think our breed community can be judged in part on how we treat our newbies. I was lucky to be part of a breed club that's full of supportive and helpful people, and to run into generous-hearted pros like Linda Cain and Mari-Lynn Davisson who were willing to help a struggling owner-handler. But I've heard too many stories about newbies being shunned and insulted at shows. There are people who have left in tears and sworn never to come back, and there are people who persevere but who come to believe that nastiness and gossip are the accepted behavior norms around the ring.

Perhaps in addition to our breed's color code of ethics (and in addition to the sportsmanship rules of the AKC), we need a golden rule of how to treat the newcomers. Maybe we should not make offensive comments under our breaths about a dog standing ringside, since it might be the beloved pet of the person holding the other end of the lead. Let's instead treat people the way we wanted to be treated when we first nervously walked into our first dog shows: with kindness and respect. Rather than critiquing the pet quality dog about to go into the ring, let's invite the owner to the next meeting of our breed club so they can learn more about the breed and the standard. We have big dogs; let's also have big hearts.