

“The Owner-handler’s Edge”

Wherever Chihuahuas compete, you will find a great many owner-handlers in the ring and a number of them show their dogs with skill that rivals that of the professionals. The owner-handler is more the rule than the exception in our breed; in fact it is almost a tradition. While this may be true in other breeds, with Chihuahuas, almost everyone feels that they can handle them in the ring because they are “small and should be easy to handle.” Nothing could be further from the truth. What the Chihuahua lacks in size, they more than make up for in intelligence, and individualism. Chihuahuas have a habit of training people to accept bad behavior as “cute” or as something to ignore. They are cute, and they very often know it. It is that cuteness lets them to get away with things that would not be allowed in a larger breed. The owner-handlers that do well and show year after year are people who have learned this lesson and work very hard training their dogs not only to show properly, but also to behave in an acceptable manner around people. They realize that each dog they show is an individual, and as such, must be trained in a manner that works for that specific dog.

I often hear complaints that the professional handlers have an edge in the ring. When you examine the facts, this may only be partly true. The better the pro handler is, the better the dogs that they will be offered for showing. The people who use handlers want the best, and the best handlers want the best dogs. On the other hand, the owner-handler does not have to divide his attention among as many dogs as the professional; consequently, they can concentrate on really fine-tuning their show dogs for presentation in the ring. Many owner-handlers breed on a small scale, produce dogs of great quality, and know how to present them as well as any professional. I have always looked at the professional handlers as a positive influence, they show good dogs, and in order to compete as owner-handlers, we must show and breed better dogs.

As an owner-handler, how can you get and keep your competitive edge in the ring? First, whether you are just starting out or have shown for years, study. Study the standard, read the material in the gazette and the many books available on the subject of handling and the breed. Most importantly, study other handlers and observe their style and technique. Go back to the basics. Arrive at the ring early and study your judge. What patterns are being used? Do single exhibits go directly to the table? Where are the distractions around the ring? Is the lighting a problem; are there large shadows that might cause a dog to balk? These are all things that can be trained for at home, and if you are lucky, at local fun matches. The more knowledge and training you take to the ring, the greater your edge.

Adaptability and concentration are the keys to handling. Each time you enter the ring, it can be a learning experience, and with experience comes expertise. In the next column, we will explore some different handling problems and how to cope with and possibly turn those problems into advantages.

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