

"Bring your dogs to the center of the ring." Sparring part 2.

When a Chihuahua exhibitor hears this phrase, it usually means that the judge has found exhibits that exemplify the standard physically, and wishes to determine if they have the outgoing temperament that has always been a breed trademark. Mrs. Sandra Goose-Allen stated, " The Chihuahua is the most terrier-like of the toy breeds, that is the quality that makes them stand out in the (toy) group." Mrs. Goose-Allen recently judged the Chihuahua Club of America National Specialty in Chicago. In her best of variety rings, she brought out male and female pairs to spar. This variation on sparring points out something that I have always believed, *our females should be just as outgoing as our males!*

A Chihuahua puppy learns the sparring behavior from its mother at a very early age. When breeding a litter, the temperament of both parents should be considered carefully, however it is the mother that controls the pups' early experiences. When a mother plays with her puppies and ultimately weans them, she is in actuality teaching them to take care of themselves. The games she plays are not unlike martial arts "katas" or routines, which may be used in later life for defense, acquisition of food or territory and interaction with other canines. These games also teach the canine signals to the young ones, their basic education so to speak. This period is the time for us to assess the puppies' temperament. It is also a time to nurture and assist the puppies in developing the characteristics so prized in the breed.

Chihuahua puppies should have interaction with humans from the earliest stages of life. By the time they open their eyes, the touch and smell of humans should be almost as natural as that of their mother. Once the puppies begin to play and show their natural inquisitiveness, we can insert human interaction into their games. This interaction is not only preparation for a show career; it readies a pup for its role as a cherished family member. At this stage, I like to use cloth toys and squeakers to play with the pups. It gets them used to paying attention to items that will later be used in lead training and free stacking (having a dog on lead pose naturally while on the floor), and to associate those items with pleasurable activity.

You need a sense of humor and a lot of patience to train young puppies. If you don't enjoy it, the puppy won't enjoy it. Do not make training sessions too long, young puppies tire easily. Try to make each training session different, routine can get old fast. Simple grooming should also be incorporated into these early sessions. If at all possible, try to train puppies with each other and with older more experienced dogs, this takes two or more people working together but the benefits are well worth it. When working young puppies on the lead, let them play with each other. This is the beginning of controlled sparring, and the prelude to free stacking. Free stacking is in reality, getting the dog to spar with you, the handler.

In the next column I will deal with problems that the owner-handler faces when showing the Chihuahua.

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