

First Impressions, Painful Memories

1997

The year of rising stock prices and falling obedience entries. When I step back and look at our world through the eyes of a newcomer, I see quite clearly why obedience interest and entries are declining. These recent experiences are painful reminders of the tough initiation many Novice A folks face.

At a recent AKC Obedience Judging Seminar, I overheard a long-time club member reprimand some Novice A handlers. "You can't have those dogs in here. Get them out of here!" Were these people disruptive? Were their dogs ill mannered? Was there a presentation going on? No. No. And, No. In fact, this outburst occurred during a lunch break. In a dog training center, where there were other dogs hanging out and being trained. It seems these Novice A people were singled out because they were not "known" to the abrasive committee member. And possibly because they had non-traditional obedience breeds.

Asking these folks to remove their dogs in a friendly, polite manner would not have caught my attention. But, had I not been there to explain away, and apologize for, this individual's rude behavior, these educated, professional, courteous people might have walked away from the obedience world altogether. (And who knows? Give them a few more encounters like this and they just might.)

During the first 12 years of my involvement in the sport, as a German Shepherd fancier, I was often asked when I was going to get a "real" obedience dog (meaning a Golden or Border Collie or Sheltie). During the past two months, I have endured more negative comments about my newest companion.

"I heard you got a Schipperke. Aren't those dirty, nasty little dogs?" "A friend of mine owned one once. She put a CD on it and then gave up. What made you get one of those?"

"Why would you want a Schipperke? You know you can't housebreak them." "My neighbor had one. She always complained because they're so stubborn and independent."

"So it's true. You really got one. Boy, are you going to be in for it. You can't get off-leash control of those dogs, you know."

Here I am, a successful, accomplished long-time obedience and conformation enthusiast showing off my little black bundle, expecting to hear words of encouragement, or at worst, amazement. I was so shocked the first couple of times this happened, I just stood there. Me, speechless! I tried the assertive, educational comeback, but the comments continued. One day I finally blew up. I blurted, "If I hear one more nasty comment about a Schipperke I'm going to scream. This little guy is cute, intelligent and housebroken. He makes me laugh, and he has all the qualities I look for in a dog. He's already doing signals, directed jumping and retrieving. Schipperkes are not stubborn. It's the people who can't train them that have the problem!"

The comments have stopped (at least to my face). Do I expect training a Schipperke to be a walk in the park? Of course not. But I enjoy a challenge, and I was ready for something different. Was there ever a moment when these comments made me re-think my decision to downsize? Nope. Did any of these remarks disappoint me? Surprise me? Hurt my feelings? Yes. You bet.

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Updated 8/7/2010

And for a short time I remembered just what it felt like to be a Novice A exhibitor, in love with his purebred Bark'n Drool.

Take a moment, close your eyes and visualize yourself in that position. You're new to the sport. You're in awe. You're nervous and scared and self-conscious as it is. You want to fit in. To be liked. To be accepted. To have a dog that can work one-tenth as well as that dog over there. Only to hear, "You can't do obedience with Bark'n Drool dogs. They're stubborn and stupid. They're not food motivated. All they do is sniff. They're independent." With each comment you feel yourself getting redder, and hotter and more embarrassed. You want to crawl in a hole. And in a way, you do. In time you escape, and pursue other interests and hobbies that are not so deflating and demeaning.

Would you like to know why so many of my Novice A students put titles on their dogs? Why there are waiting lists for my Beginners classes? Why such a high percentage of my home obedience students get hooked on competition? Why many of them earn UPs and UDXs? Why dozens even receive HITs and OTCH points? Why they do the best they can with their Bark'n Drools, regardless of their breed's supposedly "poor obedience potential?"

Because I don't criticize their breed of choice. I don't tell them that a Lhasa Apso can't heel with attention or earn a UD. That a Siberian Husky can't get total off-leash control. That a Bloodhound, Greyhound, Bouvier, PBGV, or Welsh Springer can't go High in Trial. That an intact, breed champion Rottweiler can't also earn its UD. That a junior handler can't put a UP on her pet Beagle.

I tell them that anything is possible. If they want it bad enough. If they're willing to work at it.

I tell them to be patient. And I agree that some exercises are harder with some breeds than others. But I also remind them that there is no perfect dog. I encourage them to train the dog they love, to learn from the experience and know they'll be a better trainer having worked with this dog.

I would never make derogatory comments about any breed of dog. Quite the contrary, I have great respect for the handlers and trainers who work with the unusual breeds. I have even more respect for the instructors who extend themselves to help Novice A handlers be the best that they can be — regardless of their canine companions.

At a match recently I overheard a first-time trainer with a HIT CDX Rottie getting ready for Utility. This person doesn't train with me, but she's quite nice and has a lovely working bitch. Someone asked if she was going to put a UDX on the dog. Her response? "Oh, no. I'll just retire her and be glad when she finishes her UD. My instructor really wants me to retire her. She's well, I have this 'big name kennel' Golden now. I hope to get another Rottie some day, because I really like the breed... But my instructor.. I couldn't keep my mouth shut. In no uncertain terms I let the girl know that it would be an absolute shame to retire her Rottie, that she and the dog deserve the chance to get a UDX, and her instructor has no business telling her to retire this dog —just because this instructor prefers to work with Golden. And how this was a perfect example of why so many Novice A exhibitors drop out of the sport. Something else I would never do: Forget that I was a mentor and example for my students.

At several recent Canadian trials another US exhibitor/trainer/exhibitor was observed by a number of people coaching her students outside the show building. Pinch collars and "Jerk that dog" were the instructions of the day. At another trial an exhibitor/instructor was seen with a spiked band on her left leg to stop her dog's crowding. Just outside the ring people watched as she jerked and kicked her dog in the chest. Complaints to the obedience rep fell on deaf ears. To top it off, one of this teacher's Novice A students confided to a friend that she was "so relieved she did well at a show, because now her instructor would talk to her."

Back in October 1996, when I addressed this subject in Front & Finish, I received a number of letters, including one from a veterinarian in the southeast who wrote:

"...You describe exactly the frustrating, complex 'procedure' to get into an obedience circle. It is as if you have to be born with a 'dumbbell' not a silver spoon in your mouth. After two years of training I am just

now being allowed into discussions where my dumb questions do not get the quick retort “Why don’t you just read your rule book.”

“I consider myself a beginner because I have never competed in a trial. I work in two dog clubs, often by stewarding at trials and assisting training classes. I have even chaired a match. I have paid for many private lessons and classes from UDX and OTCH trainers. I have worn out two rule books. I try to attend every trial within two hours driving distance. I have learned quite a bit compared to when I started, but I still get that funny ‘you haven’t paid your dues yet’ look. I have a poor impression of competitive obedience from the few ‘fun’ matches I was brave enough to enter. I was told by one, pre-novice judge that my dog was wonderful, but I would never be able to do it justice because I was the worst handler he had ever seen. Talk about being mortified! I wanted to grab my dog and run all the way home....”

I never thought I’d see the day when I was embarrassed and ashamed to be known as a competition obedience person. That day may be just around the corner. (Or, is it here?)

When instructors spend most of their time telling students to get a new dog, or coaching them on the fine art of cheating, when long-time exhibitors ridicule others for getting a non-traditional breed, when judges make handlers leave the ring in tears (yet feel justified in cheating as exhibitors), and when Novice A exhibitors feel they have to do well — just so their instructors will speak to them -- that’s a sad, very sad, state of affairs.

When Bob Self invited me to write an article for the inaugural issue of About Turn, The Year in Review, I was honored and excited, and eager to find the message for which I’d like to be remembered. I expected to find myself writing something upbeat and inspirational. Instead, here I am, atop my soapbox.

It’s vital that you -- the people reading this article — feel this major league kick in the butt. Hear this wakeup call. See this big, red warning flag waving right in front of your nose, and:

Stop blaming everyone else for the decline in Novice A entries and the lessening interest in the sport of obedience. Stop passing the buck. It’s not the AKC’s fault. It’s not the OTCH’s fault. It’s not the Club’s fault. It’s not because of Agility, or Herding or Tracking. Look in the mirror, folks. It’s your own damn fault. The next time you see someone cheating, or behaving in a way that’s detrimental to the sport, speak up. If your instructor tells you to lower your expectations because you own a Bark’n Drool, find a new coach. If a fellow exhibitor makes demeaning, degrading or hurtful comments about you or your dog, explain (through your tears, if necessary) how you feel when you hear those words. If a judge or steward makes comments that are inappropriate, write a letter to the AKC. Or, if you’re afraid of the consequences, copy this article and leave it for the offending party to find. Reproduce it in your club newsletter. Post it on a bulletin board. Stick it on a windshield.

And to everyone reading this article I ask: If you died tomorrow, how would you like to be remembered? As a handler who won a pile of ribbons and trophies? As a sarcastic, critical fellow exhibitor? As someone who never had time to encourage a newcomer or answer a simple question? As a judge who delighted in degrading? As an instructor who told the Bark’n Drool lovers to expect less because theirs was not an obedience breed?

Personally, I’d like to be remembered for my contributions. What I gave, instead of what I got. I want to be thought of as an advocate for the underdog. An instructor who encourages Novice A trainers to blossom and get hooked on the sport. An unusual breed booster. A trainer and exhibitor who believes success is a journey, not a destination. A dog lover who believes there’s always more to learn from my four-legged friends. And finally, I want to be remembered as someone who dares to be different.

There’s a message here. Did you get it? It would make a great bumper sticker. “Have you helped a Novice A today?”

