

THINK LIKE THE JUDGE

by Sharon Hodgens-Wood

A favorite admonition among obedience exhibitors is “Never make a judge think”

So what does a judge think? The sport of dog obedience is all about conformity and judges form a picture of the perfect performance based on the regulations we all follow when we show our dogs in the obedience ring. No additional points are awarded for originality. In fact, for better or worse, originality always makes a judge think. As an example, we've all seen a variety of hand signals and most of them conform to the definition in the regulations which states that the handler must use a single gesture with one arm and hand only, and the arm and hand must immediately return to a natural position. When we see a new variation we think the same as the other exhibitors-- “What was that?” Was it a single gesture? One arm and hand only? Returned immediately to a natural position? Remember, originality invites scrutiny and is more likely to result in a point deduction. Likewise, in the regulations the words smooth, natural and gentle are used to describe handling in the ring. Choreographed handling and complicated footwork will make the judge look a little more closely and may make him think the handler is unduly aiding his dog. The term “brisk” is also used to describe the way the dog and handler should move about the ring. A team that is working slowly and hesitantly will cause the judge to question whether the briskness requirement is being met.

For the most part, there is no judging going on between exercises but that doesn't mean things don't happen to make the judge think. Was that pat on the dog's back simply praise or did it help get the dog sitting for the start of the exercise? Most of us judges expect that exhibitors are honest and not deliberately cheating but when we see unusual handling between exercises we have to think about a deduction whether it's an honest mistake or not.

The handler that has trouble getting his dog to the start line and settled down for each exercise is making the judge wonder if maybe the dog is not under control. You definitely don't want the judge thinking about excusing you for having an unmanageable dog.

Other things that get us thinking are loud commands (is it too loud?) and is the leash loose enough in the novice heel on leash exercise or does it tighten occasionally even though the dog may not be out of heel position? When we check a dumbbell in the open class does it show chew marks? (Look for mouthing on the retrieve) Does the dog lag behind the handler getting to the start line for the first exercise? (Not scoreable but the judge may be expecting to see lagging during the heeling exercise) Does the handler ruffle up the dog's ears before the start of a retrieve exercise? (Nothing wrong with that, but the retrieve is often taught using an ear pinch.....makes you think) And what about that tap on the head to get the dog's attention before the judge gives the first command? A tap or more of a bonk?

Some things that happen in the ring make the judge think in a more positive way. The handler who is ready at ringside when it's his turn and enters briskly with the dog's attention makes the judge expect a good performance. Likewise the open or utility handler who knows to enter the ring on leash and who doesn't leave the ring until the leash is back on the dog, knows the heeling pattern and where each exercise starts will make the judge think this team will make fewer mistakes. It doesn't always turn out that way but a good impression keeps the judge from thinking about errors before he sees any.

Judges are working hard to help you and your dog qualify with the best score possible. We are always thinking about how our presence in the ring is affecting your dog. We try to be as unobtrusive as possible while giving commands and being in a position to score you fairly without getting too close.

Read the judges guidelines in your obedience regulations. If you are familiar with the recommendations given there you will be less likely to do things that cause the judge to think. Remember, we don't have that much time to think through what to do about an odd occurrence.. We have to decide quickly and move on---so the less thinking the better.