



Ask the Obedience Experts

Are You Ready?

By Elaine Hamill and Amy D. Stephens

How do we define “ready?” When it comes to ring performance potential, the definition of that word is crucial. Often we have seen handlers of some truly green dogs step into the ring and put on incredible performances. Likewise, we have seen other handlers and their dogs that appear to have had no preparation for the work ahead. It is very easy to judge from ringside, but just how accurate our interpretation of readiness is for each performance is what comes into question.

When Elaine and I were preparing for our seminar at the DCA National this year, we had joked about putting together a sign, similar to the one you would see at your local McDonald’s drive-thru window. On this sign, we would put a numbered list of things we have time and time again repeated to ourselves and our own students. This way, when asked something, we could simply point to a number for starters. (We had decided Number 3 was going to be “Proofing, Proofing, Proofing.”) It was a silly idea, but it was a significant way to explain how to get the results you want from your performance.

One of our favorite books on dog training is the Patricia Gail Burnham book, *Playtraining Your Dog*. In the early pages of that book, Ms. Burnham states, “I will tell you an important truth right at the beginning: You will receive back from the dog only what you put into him.” This statement holds true for all forms of training and educating. You would no more send your child off to school without paper and pencil, than you should put your dog in the ring before they have demonstrated their preparedness for such an arena. Yet, assessing true preparedness is the difficult part.

The biggest mistake I see in training plans for many exhibitors is putting an agenda ahead of the training. By this, I mean they decide which shows they want to enter (or actually enter some shows) before they have truly trained the dog thoroughly enough to succeed there. It is important to have goals, and there is nothing wrong with planning ahead – most shows are entered two months ahead of time anyway. The problem lies in where the handler becomes focused on the show, and not the showing. You can do a tremendous amount of disservice and damage to a dog’s future in the ring if you send them in completely unprepared for what the ring can be like. This is where that important Number 3 order of “Proofing, Proofing, Proofing” comes in.

To quote Bob Self, Sr. of *Front and Finish* magazine fame, “Train, don’t complain.” You truly cannot blame much of anything that happens in the ring on anything other than what you have trained for. The ring environment is NEVER sterile. Even at some of the elite tournaments that are designed for the ultimate perfect conditions, stuff happens (like birds in the building, loud banging doors, dogs barking, etc.). Preparing your dog to perform as best as possible in relatively unpredictable situations is crucial to success.

OK. So you understand that you have to have your Dal well prepared for his obedience debut. How do you know when that magic moment appears? The best answer we know is to try out some matches and see where you are at. By now you should be regularly qualifying in run-thrus at your training classes. It is time to take it on the road and try ring conditions at matches. Most likely, some things will be great, some a bit less than lovely. Now you know what to concentrate on in your practice sessions. If the matches you attend are the “Show & Go” format, remember to treat them as a real trial – no food or toys in the ring, no extra commands or signals. Make it a true test. Use these aids on your second run that day if you’d like, but not your first. (And always do more than one run if it’s allowed – double the practice for the drive.)

Once your Dal is comfortable and consistently qualifying at matches, you are ready to go! However, I know matches may be hard to come by when you need them, so you may need to join with some fellow trainers and trade off working in each others’ yards, or visit different training schools and clubs, or whatever. You may have to get creative to make this work, but it is a must. A dog who has only trained in one or two places does not have the experience to work to his/her highest potential in a show environment.

And now we have to admit that following this regimen may take far too long; especially for utility. You don’t want to wait until your Dal is too old to jump to finally show in the advanced classes! Also, sometimes years of polishing turns the handler into a nervous wreck at ring time; feeling that so much time and money has already been put into this, it has to go perfectly or else. Showing should never be life affirming; you should not put that kind of pressure on yourself or your dog. A good attitude is always the first thing you need to put in your show bag each time. And – don’t forget a sense of humor to be able to laugh at your Dal and yourself, as needed. Sometimes it is the right thing to just enter and see how it goes. But do learn from the experience as you would at a match; figure out your strengths and weaknesses and train accordingly so that future trials will go better. Try to think of each new title attempt as a work in progress. It’s always a fluid situation working with another being under constantly changing variables. Go with the flow!

And, when you are in the ring and things are not going according to plan, help out your partner. Training in the ring is technically not allowed, but reasonable help without interference will not get you booted out of the ring. Extra commands will sometimes mean an NQ, sometimes just points off, but they may give your Dal the confidence he/she needs right at the time they need help the most. If you do get excused for training in the ring, you do not get a black mark on your dog’s record; you just are not able to finish the exercises in that class on that day. There’s always another show. Good luck and enjoy!