

An excerpt from

Positive Training for Show Dogs

Chapter 9

by Vicki Ronchette, Dogwise Publishing. 800-776-2665, www.dogwise.com

Permission to reproduce excerpt with attribution granted by Publisher.

When a dog is not showing well, finding a positive solution means returning to the basic principles of how dogs learn, and it requires creativity on the part of the handler. You need to know what drives your dog, and then use that knowledge to help him improve. Remember, you can't force a dog to enjoy showing. You must figure out what will help him like it.

Depending on the problem or predicament, food may not be the answer. That's why you have to think carefully before proceeding. Following are a variety of techniques, all based on positive methods, which can be used to solve common problems. Your specific predicament may not be included, but these solutions may help you formulate a plan of your own.

Fear

The show environment—noise, strange people and dogs, activity, new surroundings—can be frightening to dogs. It is not unusual for show dogs to develop some kind of fear associated with showing. Sometimes you can pinpoint the cause of the fear, many times you cannot.

More important than figuring out the cause of your dog's fear is handling the fears delicately and correctly.

Fear-based problems should be corrected with positive reinforcement. It is unkind and unfair to insist that a frightened dog "Just deal with it" or "Get over it." You have to be careful or you can ruin a dog (not only for the show ring, but also as a companion) by forcing him to do something that frightens him. Remember, frightened dogs are not "getting away" with anything. They aren't looking for a victory over you, they are just too afraid to do what you are asking. It's very important to look carefully at a dog's reactions. Do not assume that "He just doesn't want to do it" or he is "being stubborn." The dog that is labeled "stubborn" is often afraid or misunderstood.

Generally fear is best dealt with by using desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques. As explained in Chapter 8, desensitization is when you slowly desensitize the dog by introducing the triggers (what scares him) at a low level, and then counter-condition by giving him something he really likes in the presence of the trigger. Fear should dissipate as the dog experiences something pleasant in the presence of

what causes fear. This technique of retraining a dog isn't used enough in the dog show world.

Fear of the Table

Many dogs are afraid of being placed on the show-ring examination table. It may be because of a fear of the judge, or being lifted and placed on a small surface high above the ground (high for a small dog!) If you show a dog who fears the table, follow the desensitization and counter-conditioning techniques described below.

Step 1. Fold up the table legs and lay the table on the ground so it is stable and only a few inches high. Fill your pocket or bait bag with treats the dog absolutely cannot resist. Entice the dog to the table by setting a treat on the table. If you are training with a clicker, click and treat when your dog goes near the table to collect the treat. If you aren't using a clicker, use a verbal marker such as, "Yes" or "Good boy."

Step 2. Once your dog moves near the table comfortably, use the treat to lure him onto the table. With the treat in your hand, move it over the table so that the dog must step on the table to receive the treat. Work on this step until the dog is happily hopping on the table for his treats. Don't force him on the table. Consider feeding his meals on the table to reinforce good "feelings" about the table.

Step 3. Next, set the table up to its full height. Carefully lift your dog onto the table and give him a treat. At this point, it's not important that he stacks. Your goal is to condition him to love being on the table. If your dog seems afraid, place the table against a wall, which can add a sense of security. Stick to this step until the dog is comfortable with the table. Once he is, feed his dinner on the table. Once the dog is comfortable on the table, work on stacking and examination as discussed in Chapters 7 and 8.

Vicki Ronchette, CPDT, has been working with dogs professionally for over 22 years. She is involved in Dachshund and Australian Cattle Dog rescue and competes with her dogs in conformation, earthdog trials, field trials, obedience and Rally-O as well as handling show dogs for others professionally. She is the owner of Braveheart Dog Training in San Leandro, California where she lives with her husband Rick and their seven dogs.

