

Dog Shows: Sometimes It's Tough Being a Kid – by Kristin Krumpe

Having grown up in the whelping box, under the grooming tent, and in the show ring, I know firsthand the rewarding, and sometimes difficult, lessons our youngsters can learn through the sport of dogs. I loved to compete and quickly took to BreedCompetition and Junior Showmanship, which does not mean it was always easy. In fact I have vivid memories of stomping away from a ring, holding back tears on more than one occasion. But the good memories far outnumber the bad, and the lessons I learned along the way have made me the handler and dog person I am today. Although I “aged out” of Juniors more than two decades ago, I remain a student and a supporter of our junior handlers today. I know their joy, and unfortunately, I also know their frustration at times.

Lessons from the JuniorsRing: The Toughest Gig in (Dog) Show Business

Anyone who has ever shown a dog will tell you that dog shows are a tricky business. Sometimes there seems to be no rhyme or reason for what happens on any given day. Even as adults, it's easy to be discouraged, to doubt oneself, to pack it in. Now imagine how difficult all this must be for a kid. Most children learn how to win and lose on a playing field somewhere. They may not like losing, but it's not hard to understand how they lost when the other team scored more points. There are few life experiences that prepare a child for the fickle subjectivity of a dog show...except perhaps beauty pageant competition. Within a dog show, Junior Showmanship has to be one of the most trying areas where a child can compete because in the end, it's the child who is on the line. After all, the handler's ability, not the quality of the dog, is being scrutinized, and many young egos are not naturally equipped to deal with that pressure. Therefore, we should commend and support every child who competes in Junior Showmanship because they are the very bravest among us.

I grew up with Old English Sheepdogs and am naturally sympathetic toward the junior today who struggles with their stubborn, clumsy Swissy in a ring full of Setters, Dobes, and other flashy breeds that practically show themselves. Many of my contemporaries were quick to trade in their Sheepdogs for easier breeds. But Sheepdogs were the breed I loved and, most importantly, the breed I really KNEW. So I learned how to present a Sheepdog as well as any adult handler in my breed, and success eventually came. What many kids starting out don't realize is that a good handler must be very knowledgeable about the breed they show, in order to know their dogs virtues and faults, and find ways to either accentuate or minimize them. A good Juniors judge will appreciate that.

Ah, good judges! Let's face it, not every person judging Junior Showmanship should be. Some seem to really enjoy it and know what judging Juniors is all about, while others seem to be there just to collect their \$2 a dog fee. Juniors should not be discouraged by bad judging, since looking for the good judges is just another part of the dog game. Some judges may not seem to understand how your breed should be presented. Stick to your guns, I say. Changing the way you handle, to a style that's not at all appropriate for your breed, can be dangerous, as habits learned at a young age can be difficult to break. I've seen a young lady recently who handles a St. Bernard in Juniors, and it

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struck me as odd that she stacks her Saint and stands a few feet in front of the dog, baiting it as if it were a Sheltie. The dog's outline looked awful as it stared up at her, its head disappearing into its neck, which then disappeared into the shoulder. I wanted to see her stretching that dog's neck, and really presenting that massive Saint head to the judge...in other words, accentuating his virtues.

Over-handling is also quite common in the Juniors ring. Many juniors seem to think that if they're not constantly fixing this or fiddling with that, they're not handling....when it actually sends the message that they didn't set the dog up properly the first time, or perhaps their dog is not well-trained. You know what they say – “if it ain't broke...” More than once I have seen a junior stare back at the judge with a big Pepsodent smile, never once looking down at his or her dog to make sure the gait was proper. That kind of intense stare can even make a judge feel almost uncomfortable, so they look away which is the last thing a handler wants. An occasional glance back at the judge to make eye contact is a one thing, but then you immediately want to look back at your dog and draw the judge's eye to your dog as if to say, “Look at this dog, look at him move!” We must remember that although it's the junior's handling ability that is being evaluated, it's still a DOG show. Good handlers always want to draw attention to their dogs, not themselves. Back in November I watched a great job of Junior judging at a show in New England. I agreed with the judge's choices, and she truly seemed to enjoy what she was doing. A few weeks later I found myself sitting next to her, watching groups at another cluster. I commented that I'd recently seen her judge Juniors and complemented her on the job she did. Before I could mention anything specific she had done, she said “I loved my Best Junior that day, that girl with the Portuguese Water Dog. She just disappeared in the ring.” This judge proceeded to tell me some of the other kids who were very strong that day. That she remembered her winners was not surprising given the obvious enthusiasm and seriousness with which she approached her job, but I was also pleased to hear her reason for her Best Junior choice. I told her so, that I felt like I wasn't necessarily watching a junior, but a real handler. Remember: a truly great handler should be practically invisible to you, although you will find that you cannot take your eyes off his dog.

Youngsters in the BreedRing

Young handlers can learn just as much about handling a dog in their breed classes, if not more. We should be encouraging all of our juniors to be spending as much time as they can at our breed ring, watching, showing and learning. It's at the breed ring where one learns how other handlers (pros and owners alike) best present their Swissies. It's where one learns to evaluate their own dog's strengths and weaknesses. As a nine-year-old, getting ready to embark on my own Juniors “career,” I spent more time than I should have watching Juniors, when I should have been spending time at my own breed ring. Since the Sheepdog was rarely seen in the Juniors ring, I was learning how to handle everything but my own dog! Once I started showing as a junior, I naturally lost a lot more than I won. When I became discouraged, I would spend more time at the breed

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ring, and invariably when I went back to showing in Juniors, I went back a better, more confident handler.

At the Leesburg National, it was wonderful to see so many of our juniors handling in the breed, and when they weren't in the ring, most were watching intently from ringside. Watch out, because our juniors are going to give us a real run for our money! At the Eukanuba National Championships in January, one of our youngsters went into the ring with some of the top professional handlers in our breed and came away with the 1st Award of Excellence, an awesome feat. Moreover, at Westminster last year, another junior took Best of Opposite Sex with a Swissy in a field of top pros.

A Word About Role Models

Role models come in all forms for our Swissy juniors. The most obvious are the parents of the juniors themselves. When I was young, I witnessed an incredible amount of stage-parenting behavior outside the ring, and it is every bit as evident today. Many parents are often quick to tell their child who didn't win that the judge obviously had no idea what he was doing. I'm sure some of those parents just want to make their child feel better, the same way we want to make ourselves feel better when our dog fails to win his class or take the breed. It's very tempting to always blame it on the judge. Even if it was true, what message does that send to our children – that every time you don't win, the judge is a buffoon, and likewise the judge who puts you up is a genius? What happens when the judge who gave you first place three months ago sends you home without a ribbon the next time? Dog show judging is and always will be subjective...but that's what keeps it interesting.

Whether or not we have children of our own, I would caution us all to be on our best behavior when youngsters are in our midst. There may be juniors who look up to you because you're a good handler yourself, or perhaps they respect what you have done for the breed...and you might never know it. Let us not disappoint them by gossiping about the competition, or letting them see our disappointment when we didn't get that expected win. Good sportsmanship is contagious.

If We're Not Having Fun, What's the Point?

Our junior handlers, plugging away with their Swissies, may well be the future of the GSMD, and we should do everything we can to encourage them and keep them in our breed. Over the last thirty plus years, I have been saddened to see AKC shows slowly evolving from a family sport into a sport of professionals. Even adults who come into the sport today are often gone within a few years because they don't get the mentoring they need, they feel they can't compete or are just generally turned off because it's just not fun. Imagine how easily a child can be driven away from the sport if we don't keep it fun for them.

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When I was growing up, my parents would pack up my brothers and me and haul us off to the dog shows for a weekend of camping, barbeques and camaraderie with other families in our breed. We still reminisce about “Camp Krumpe,” which our rag-tag set up of campers and tents would be dubbed. I played with other breeder’s puppies at the shows, making mental notes about how they were different from our puppies. When we weren’t at the shows, we cared for the dogs as a family. Even my brothers, who have never set foot in a show ring or picked up a dog brush, could be found scooping the yard, napping in the whelping box, or sweeping floors and selling burgers at the matches our club held. For me, all of these activities, which were FUN, minimized the importance of what happened in the ring at the last show. And what worked as kid, I find still works today. So when you’ve had a bad day in the ring, you did your best and your best wasn’t good enough for a blue ribbon, learn from it and then go find the nearest puppy pen where those Swissy kisses will remind you of what it’s really all about...having a good time with your dog.