

## **The Joy of Showing Your Own Dog, or How I Learned to Love the Show Ring**

By Joyce Miller

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Handling a show dog in the ring takes lots of practice, good teachers, lots more practice, and lots of experience. It requires a willingness to make mistakes and to learn from those mistakes. Above all, it requires a willingness to lose and know that in the losing you have learned something. And it requires that when you lose, you smile and congratulate the winners, knowing that tomorrow is another show.

When I was a child, my mother bred and showed Boxers. She loved showing her dogs, and the handler she emulated was Jane Kemp. She took me to shows with her, and I don't think I ever saw her happier. But my father, who had chosen the breed and purchased a bitch with the agreement to show her, to breed her, and to return a puppy, had little use for the show ring, or as he called it, the beauty ring. To him, it was nothing more than a beauty pageant: the dogs and owners only had to walk around the ring and stand at attention. I grew up believing there was nothing to showing dogs.

I didn't learn how wrong he was until I was in my 50s and had to show my first show Airedale. I look back with embarrassment on my first attempts in the ring: stiff, stilted, no clue of what it took to show off a dog or how to train a dog to do this. Handlers told me there was nothing to it. People who called themselves mentors told me what to do: loose lead, keep the head up, make sure that the dog is moving correctly, hold the head up, the tail up, and keep the dog stacked. Every time I entered the ring, I felt like "Baby" learning to dance in the movie, [Dirty Dancing](#).

Handling classes were of no help: every Tuesday evening, I took my first show Airedale to handling class. No one gave us any instruction. We just lined up, kept moving up to the front of the line, stacked our dog, took it down and back, and went around to the end. Every week, I looked desperately around the class: What was I supposed to do? Who could I emulate? Each week, I picked someone who seemed to know what they were doing and tried to copy them. Even though many of the people in the class were very experienced, I did not have a clue whether I was copying something that would work in the Airedale ring or not. In short, to quote Corally Burmaster, a good friend of mine, all I was doing each week in handling class was rearranging my ignorance. My first show dog and my second show dog were finished by professional handlers.

Years later, with 16 Tom and Kay Lams workshops and four George Alston workshops under my belt, with one owner handled champion to my credit, and even teaching a successful handling class, I still did not feel confident in the ring. I was showing Dilys, a granddaughter of that first show Airedale, and when she was finally in good coat and condition, she decided that judges could not go over her. Looking back on this, I now know that she was reacting to my stress as the judge approached: "ooh, mum's clenching and the judge is coming towards us." She did this at three shows under three wonderful

judges who gave her every opportunity. Each judge counseled me to get her out more frequently during the week. But I was doing that, and I knew that was not the problem.

The problem was me. I was tense and insecure in the ring. I had to get over that, and I had to do it with that dog. By then I was teaching a handling class the way I wanted handling classes organized: a six-week course focused on two weeks of gaiting, two weeks of presentation, and two weeks of putting it all together. In my classes, I had both AKC and UKC exhibitors. The UKC exhibitors seemed to be much more relaxed about showing than the AKC exhibitors. So I decided to go to a UKC show with them.

I entered a UKC show in Giddings Texas. I had the only Airedale entered. The judges were excellent, and the people were very friendly. The first judge I showed to gave us best of breed and then a Group 2. But more importantly, I was so relaxed when I went into the ring that my girl stood rock solid for exam, with her ears alert and her tail up. At the second of the three shows that weekend, she was so solid that she took Group 1 and then went Reserve Best In Show. And I was having so much fun and getting so many good wishes from all the exhibitors that I did not think twice about being nervous.

Not only did I have fun in the ring, but I got to talk to other exhibitors, learn about their breeds and what they were doing, and I got to talk with the judges. On Saturday night, we all went out to dinner with the judges. And the judges talked freely at the show and at dinner about what they liked, what they were looking for, and, when they were talking with us individually, they talked about what they liked about our dogs and what we were doing right as handlers. The atmosphere removed the fear and the nerves that I had always experienced at shows, fear and nerves made worse by all the critics I had outside the ring who pounced on what I did wrong and never told me what I did right. Above all, these judges renewed my confidence in my dog.

After the fun I had at that UKC show, I decided to try another venue, the International Shows that were held in Hutto TX on New Year's weekend. This would be four shows in two days under four AKC judges, two from the United States, two from Canada. Once again, we were the only Airedale entered. And once again, we had a great time. At both the UKC and the International shows, there is no focus on grooming. My Airedale was well groomed, but instead of spending hours getting her ready for the ring, I kept track of time, and about 10 minutes before we were to go into the ring, I put her on the table, brushed her out, and took her to the ring.

At the International Shows, as at the UKC shows, the atmosphere was friendly and relaxed. Judges talked to exhibitors throughout the day, during breaks, and not only gave you written critiques in the ring, but gave you more information about how they saw your dog in informal conversations during breaks. At these shows, the first level championship requires three certificates from judges who rate your dog as conforming well to your standard, and one of those judges has to come from another country. If there are more dogs of your breed, you still compete to win classes and the breed, but every dog in the ring, regardless of whether they finish first or fourth, can get the coveted certificate. All weekend, my girl went Best of Breed (no competition) and then went on to go Group 1 at

two shows to show in the BIS ring. So we ended up with 8 ring experiences and an International championship.

But the most significant part of these experiences was that I changed. I became a more relaxed handler, and I started having fun in the ring. I actually looked forward to going into the ring, and regardless of the outcome, I had fun. Win or lose, I praised my dog and I could feel the difference in me. I am sure that my dog felt it too.

Our next show was an AKC show. Instead of going to the show early, I got there in time to set up, brush my dog, and go in the ring. Instead of being fearful and nervous, I was eager to show my dog to the judge. And it worked: she won a four-point major under a top terrier judge. We went to three more shows together before she finished. We did not always win, and one weekend, we didn't even win our class. But she finished with four majors, and, win or lose, both of us showed well and we had fun in the ring.



CH Jubilee Daughter of Time (Dilys) at ease and in the ring

These non-AKC shows provide an excellent venue for building confidence in yourself and your dog. They also provide good venues for introducing a new dog to the show ring and for introducing puppies to the show atmosphere. Both UKC and International shows have classes for three to six month puppies, and the judges are very good with the puppies. Other exhibitors make much of the puppies, and the casual, sometimes chaotic, atmosphere of these less organized shows give puppies great experiences.

And you come home with ribbons and medallions that your dogs recognize as significant. By the end of our first weekend at a UKC show, when the last judge handed me our huge best of breed rosette, Dilys grabbed the rosette and pranced out of the ring. This was her rosette, and it was meant to hang on her crate! She and I had become an equally invested team.

To learn more about The International All Breed Canine Association of America (IABCA) and its shows, go to <http://www.internationaldogshow.com/> for show requirements, registration information, and a current show calendar.

To learn more about United Kennel Club shows, go to <http://ukcdogs.com/>. Click on Events and keep clicking until you get to the conformation show calendar to find shows in your location. UKC has different groups than AKC, but our group is the Terrier group so we have no confusion.

Dogs that are AKC registered can be cross registered in both of these registries with their AKC registration number or certificate. UKC allows day-of show entries, but you save money by entering in advance.

To learn about the experiences of others who show in both AKC and UKC, join a show list, such as the Let's Discuss Judging list at [www.groups.yahoo.com](http://www.groups.yahoo.com) and check out the archives under UKC.