

Can I show my dog in AKC conformation events?

Dog shows can be confusing to the average dog owner, but still many people are interested in learning how to join this unique world.

Watching dog shows and competitions on television can be entertaining, and some dog owners wonder if they and their favorite canine could join in the activity and perhaps someday end up famous. The types and numbers of dog competitions are growing and the barriers to entry are low, but depending on which sector you choose to compete in, the barriers to success can be high.

The Breed Standard Defines Show Dog Perfection

Every dog is beautiful in its own way, whether that be its health, personality, coloring or the lay of its coat. If you want to show your dog at AKC events, you have to accept your breed's Parent Club's definition of perfection, which is written down in a breed standard that is recorded with the AKC. Each breed standard is unique and meant to reflect the breed's original function, whether that be a working heritage like hunting or herding or simply as a personal companion. Breed standards are the same in that they all will mention the same elements, including movement, coat, and head shape, but they also differ in that something that is extremely important in one breed standard may be of minimal or no importance to another.

Comparing Your Dog to the Breed Standard

Any dog of a particular breed should be fairly well described by its breed standard, i.e. any Beagle is more likely to conform to the Beagle standard than the standard for any other breed, say a Harrier or English Foxhound which have similar markings and origins. The differences within a breed that separate the best dogs in terms of the standard of perfection can be subtle; as a matter of fact dog show judges have to go through a rigorous system of prerequisites, testing, and provisional judging before being fully licensed to judge a given breed. This makes it difficult for the average dog owner to determine the quality of their dog relative to its breed standard.

Origins and Expertise Increase the Likelihood of Show Quality

Show quality dogs most often are produced by breeders with a consistent track record of success at dog shows with dogs that they have bred. Success in this context means consistently producing AKC show champions, not just blue ribbons or Winners and Best of Breed wins where there were few other dogs in competition. In very popular breeds where the competition can be fierce these titles can be more difficult to obtain, but a breeder who does not personally compete in dog shows and produce champions is not likely to sell many show quality animals. The appearance of some show champions in the pedigree is not a guarantee of show quality; it is uncommon even for litters from top winning dogs to all be show quality.

Evaluating Your Dog's Show Quality

If your dog was purchased from a successful breeder, it is likely they told you if the dog had show potential at the time of purchase, and they should be able to give you an honest evaluation of its current show potential as well. If you did not purchase your dog from a breeder with this type of record, the likelihood that your dog will be

competitive in conformation competition is lower. You can contact a local breed club and ask if one of their breeder-members would be willing to give you an honest evaluation; conformation class instructors and professional dog show handlers may also be able to give you an idea as to whether your dog might be competitive in the show ring.

Showing Your Dog in AKC Shows

If your dog has not been spayed or neutered and has no disqualifying faults for its breed, it can be shown in conformation. If you simply want to gain experience showing and gain contacts within the show dog community for your breed, this can be a valuable experience regardless of the level of your dog's show quality. Unfortunately, it can also be a disappointing experience if your dog, who will certainly always be beautiful in your eyes, is not judged to be as close to the official breed standard of perfection as the other dogs in competition.