

Getting Started Showing Dogs

Learn the basics for entering and competing in AKC conformation shows with your dog

Showing dogs can be a captivating hobby; it's harder than it looks to the casual observer, but solid preparation can make it easier to enjoy and succeed in the sport. Take some time to observe shows, learn the rules and then spend time learning how to groom and present your dog before entering so you can spend more time enjoying your first show.

Dog Show Rules and Procedures

The AKC system that awards championship points has its own logic, but it can be confusing. Observers and new exhibitors may find it hard to follow what's going on in the ring without a solid understanding of the rules and how they are applied in practice. You'll find that many dog show exhibitors and club officials enjoy the opportunity to educate new exhibitors. Many shows now offer new exhibitor orientations open to anyone; check the premium list or judging schedule to find out when they will be held. The best way to learn is to sit with a seasoned exhibitor and a dog show catalog and ask them to explain what is going on as you watch judging of a breed with an entry of 10 or more. This should allow you to see that a number of different classes being judged, a Winners Class, the procedure for awarding Reserve Winners, Best of Winners, Best of Opposite Sex and Best of Breed. This is best done with a breed other than your own at a time when neither one of you is pressured for time preparing dogs for the ring. That way you can concentrate on the procedure and won't be so distracted by the dogs themselves. You should also obtain a copy of the AKC Rules Applying to Dog Shows, which can be ordered from the AKC or picked up at no charge from the Education table at many shows.

Training for the Show Ring

The best way to prepare to show is to take your dog to a conformation dog training class. These classes are not as widely available as obedience training classes, but there are usually a few choices in any metro area. To locate these classes, ask people you know who show dogs or look for a local kennel club website and contact someone with the club to ask for recommendations. Some clubs or schools offer classes specifically tailored to new exhibitors and these would be ideal, if you cannot locate this type of class, make sure you tell the trainer that you are new to the sport when you arrive. The things you'll need in addition to your dog are a show lead and bait. If you were not able to find a show lead appropriate for your breed in advance of the class, bring your dog on a choke chain and a leather lead no more than 4 feet long; you can ask for advice about what to buy and where to get it locally in the class. Bait is simply anything your dog is very interested in that will fit in a jacket pocket – you can use a small fanny pack or purchased bait bag if you don't have roomy pockets. Your dog will be more distracted than they are at home, so make sure these are REALLY interesting food or toys.

Grooming for the Show Ring

All dog breeds need some grooming before being shown. Some breeds, are shown with very little preparation, a bath, clean ears and teeth and short nails are all that's required. At the other extreme are hard coated breeds than need to be hand stripped

for months to develop an optimal show coat, profusely coated breeds requiring extensive scissoring and those that need to be clipped in precise patterns. This is where you need the assistance of an experienced breeder/exhibitor or professional handler to learn how to prepare your dog and to get a sense of whether or not you can do it yourself. Ask an experienced breeder or handler about show preparation regardless of your breed, some short haired breeds require more work than it appears.

Entering and Competing

Dog show entries close roughly two and a half weeks before the show date. Have an experienced exhibitor help you fill out the entry form the first time and ask for their advice on which class to enter. If your dog is eligible for an age based class (Puppy, 12-18 Months) entering that class that is a good choice. If you have a breed that usually has a large entry, the Amateur Handler and Novice classes can be a good choices for new handlers if the kennel club offers them. If you can, accompany someone else to the show, so they can help you learn the ropes about finding grooming space and getting settled. Allow plenty of time to get to the show, set up and groom before your judging time as judge will not wait for late exhibitors. Make a point of enjoying the experience, win or lose. When you're out of the ring take time to socialize with other exhibitors, visit the vendors' booths and watch other breeds and performance competitions at the show.