

Showing Your Own Dog

The Basics

By Betsy Copeland

Handling your Bloodhound yourself in conformation competition can be exciting and rewarding! It can just as often be frustrating and nerve-wracking, as you struggle to position and move your dog and yourself! As you sweat and swear, and your dog won't keep more than two feet on the ground at a time, you may find yourself wondering how those old-timers and professionals manage to make it look so effortless, so polished, so routine?

Partly, of course, it is a matter of training and practice, both for the handler individually, and with each new dog that he brings out. But there are basic principles to give the novice a starting place upon which to build his personal experience.

There are four essential aspects to showing your own dog successfully, each contributing a portion to the entire picture: stacking or setting-up; moving; gait and patterns; equipment; and presentation.

Section I

Almost every breed of dog is presented to the judge for examination in the same basic posture. Not just a matter of convention and tradition, this is designed to showcase the structural features the judge is evaluating, and to give a uniform basis for comparing one dog to another and each to the AKC Standard for the breed. It is often referred to as a "stack" and maneuvering your dog into that posture is called "stacking" or "setting up." Read your standard carefully and be critical with your own dog's faults and strengths. Don't be afraid to video yourself and compare your movements to a video of a more experienced handler. It's a good tool!

A bloodhound should stand in a four square position: When viewed from the side, the front legs should be directly in line and underneath the top of the shoulder blades, commonly called the "withers." A line from the top of the shoulder blade, drawn perpendicular to the ground, should run right through the middle of the front foot.

When viewed from the front, the front legs should drop in a straight line from the top of the shoulders; the elbows and feet should turn neither in nor out; and the distance between the front feet should be roughly equal to the distance between the shoulders.

The rear legs should be drawn back just far enough so that the length of each hock is perpendicular to the ground. The rear feet are set slightly further apart than the front feet: a line drawn back from the outside of each front foot should touch the inside of the corresponding rear foot. The head is held so that the top line of the muzzle is parallel to the ground, and the tail is held up and curved slightly over the back.

Sounds simple, doesn't it? And sure looks that way in the ads!! Now, how do you manipulate your beast into this rather unlikely pose? Here are a few basic principles to remember: Always stand at your dog's right side when you begin to stack him; his head should be pointed towards your right, and the judge will be seeing his left side in profile. Always move your dog's legs from the elbow in front and the hocks or stifle in the rear. Never move his legs by grasping a foot or a pastern (wrist).

Start by getting control of the head. Slip the fingers of your right hand into the "V"-shaped groove formed under the lower jaw by both lower jaw bones, and place your right thumb near the right jaw hinge, where the upper and lower jaws meet.

Then position the front legs: Holding the right side of the head in your right hand, reach over the dog's back and grasp his left elbow (the one nearer to the judge) with your left hand; place the leg in a straight line underneath the top of the shoulder blade. Remove your left hand from the elbow and use it to grasp the left side of the head; remove your right hand from the leg, grasp the right elbow and follow the above procedure for the right front leg.

Switch hands on the head again, and use your left hand to position both hocks, again the one nearer the judge first. You may either reach underneath the dog's abdomen and move the left leg by the stifle joint (knee) or reach over the dog's back and hindquarters, cup the left hock joint in your left hand and position the leg in that manner. Repeat with the right rear leg. It is not necessary to move both rear legs in the same fashion. Depending on your dog's structure and what is most comfortable for both of you, you may either move both rear legs by the stifle, both by the hock, or one by each.

You may see some handlers lifting their dog's entire front end off the ground and dropping it into place. Do not do this unless your dog both has a superb front and is very well-trained; otherwise you are apt to look awkward and may waste valuable set-up time. This is equally true for lifting and "plunking" the rear. Remember that the judge only has 2-3 minutes to examine and move each dog in the ring! Don't waste it!

After you have positioned your dog's front and rear legs, check that his flews are hanging straight and not caught on a tooth, and that his ears are hanging freely and not caught in the lead. Then, with your left hand, gently grasp the tail at the base from the underside and stroke upwards and outwards until the tail rises to the correct position. Run your fingers along the length of the tail to about 2-3" from the tip and hold it gently from the back with your fingers pointing downward (not grasping the tail...you aren't using it to hold him still!) Your dog is now stacked!

Once you have the feel of the proper procedure, practice stacking your dog in as short a time as possible. Stack him in front of a horizontal mirror or other reflective surface to see exactly what picture you are presenting to the judge, and adjust his position accordingly. Stack your dog informally at least once a day, as you are walking through your house or yard; don't make a big deal of it, or spend more than two or three minutes on it: set him up, tell him to "stand, stay," hold the position for a count of ten, and then release him with much verbal praise and a food treat if one is handy. Training

yourself to move swiftly and easily through the motions of stacking is the most important part of training

Section II

Judges watch dogs moving in the ring to assess the soundness, smoothness, and efficiency with which the separate parts of the animal work together. A part is only good if it contributes to overall functional usefulness. A correctly structured dog moves freely and easily, and no one part attracts the eye with a break from the general smoothness and flow.

The judge evaluate a a moving dog from three points of view: going directly away from him, coming directly towards him, and from the side. Movement is almost always assessed from a trot, as this gait puts the most stress on all four limbs and will show up any unsoundness that might be hidden at a walk or gallop. A trot is a two-beat gait, in which two of the feet are always touching the ground and two are always in the air. A proper trot pairs the feet diagonally, the right front and left rear moving together, and the left front and right rear in unison.

There is another two-beat gait that is not acceptable in the show ring: it is called the "pace" or "pacing," when the two legs on the same side of the dog move together, producing a rolling effect like that of a camel, an animal designed to pace. Some dogs seem predisposed to pace; it is considered rather a lazy gait, and increasing the speed of movement will often snap the dog from a pace into a proper trot.

In the ring dogs are usually moved on the handler's left side, with only the left hand holding the leash. It is a rule of thumb in showing, however, always to keep the dog between the handler and the judge, so there are times when it may be advisable to switch the leash to your right hand and position the dog on your right side. Practice this so that you and your dog aren't caught by surprise if its needed

When preparing to move your dog, first gather up any excess leash neatly in your left hand and keep it there. Hold the leash with only your left hand, in a loose fist with your thumb pointing upwards. Tuck your elbow in and pivot your left forearm at the elbow to control the position of your dog. As you move your left forearm, keep your thumb pointing up. (Practice this with a set of keys attached to the lead instead of the dog so you can gather it smoothly and naturally)

While moving, keep your right hand loosely down at your side. If you find it waving in the air, or swinging back and forth, tuck it into a pocket or your belt for practice, but don't plaster your whole right arm rigidly against your side!

Practice not lifting your legs too high off the ground or bending your knees excessively. Try to take long, gliding, effortless steps to make a smooth run. Your goal is as much forward movement with as little vertical action as possible.

Remember to move in as straight a line as possible. Before starting to move, spot a goal to move toward, and then head directly for it. Remember the judge is watching your dog, not you, and try to move your dog directly away from his line of sight. When coming back towards the judge, aim yourself at a spot just off of his left shoulder, so your dog will be moving directly at him.

While moving your dog, keep your lower body in line with the direction of movement. In order to watch what your dog is doing as you move him, you may incline your upper torso slightly to your left, so that partial swings of your head will both keep you heading where you need to go, and allow you to keep an eye on Fido!

Before you begin to move your dog, make certain that his collar, or the collar portion of his show lead, is well up under his chin and in front of the neck bones just behind his ears. First pull the collar forward under his chin with your right hand, then remove your right hand and pull the collar right up behind his ears with your left hand. Be sure the collar is snug without being too tight before beginning to move.

You will need to learn both how to move your dog individually and as part of the entire class of dogs in the ring at the same time. The judge moves all of the dogs together to compare their side gaits, both the forward "reach" of the forelegs and the quality of "drive" from the rear legs. Group movement is almost always done in one or more counter-clockwise circles around the entire ring, dogs on the inside (left side) of their handlers.

When moving in a group be certain to leave enough room behind the dog in front of you so that you don't "run your dog's nose up the next dog's rear end!" If your dog is moving faster than the one in front of him, never pass; swing wide on your corners and move somewhat to the outside. Remember that the judge is probably only watching one small section of the ring, to see each dog as it goes by, and modify the distance between dogs so yours will be seen at his best when the judge is looking at him!

If you are the first handler in line listen carefully to the judge's instructions, to how many times he wants you to go around the ring, and where he wants you to stop. If you are uncertain, ask for clarification. Don't just start off moving as soon as you are ready; visually or verbally check each handler in line behind you, and wait until everyone is ready before starting to move your dog. If you aren't first in line, watch both the judge and the first handler carefully, since sometimes only the first in line can hear the judge's instructions to the entire group.

Dogs are moved individually in patterns that are generally consistent from one dog to the next, since the judge is trying to compare all of the dogs doing the same thing. Always arrive at a show early enough to watch your judge before you need to go in the ring, so you can see what judging procedures and movement patterns he is using. Generally his procedure won't vary from breed to breed unless there are great differences in size between the breeds that he is judging.

The most common movement patterns are "down and back," or the "triangle." Judges may refer to them by these designations; or point to the places in the ring that they want you to pass by, with or without accompanying verbal instructions; or merely ask you to move your dog, assuming that you have been watching the previous handlers and know where he wants you to go. So it is wise to watch closely!

"Straight down and back" may be down the center of the ring or on a diagonal. Watch where the judge is standing and his angle to the ring. Then move your dog directly away from him to the end of the ring, slowing down as you approach the end so the dog can turn smoothly, swing your dog around your body to his right as you turn 180 degrees to your right, and move back toward the judge, always keeping the leash in your left hand and your dog on your left side. There are other variations, but the judge will let you know how to move if he chooses to use them.

A judge may ask you to move from your place in line in a circle around the ring and return to your original place. There is no need for anything fancy here; simply gather the lead into your left hand, keep the dog at your left side, and move around the ring. After you complete your circle, be sure to watch the judge and see if he has any further instructions for you: he may move you to a different position in line, hopefully closer to the front!

At the end of any movement pattern, the judge will often tell you or gesture to you to go around the ring to the end of the line. Even if he says and does nothing, if the previous dogs in the class have been sent to the end, you are to do so also. The judge may or may not watch your dog move. Watch his ring procedure and see if he carefully follows the movement of each dog to the end of the line, watches them move only part way around, or immediately starts working with the next dog in line. It is always good practice to move your dog nicely, as if the judge were looking, whether he is or not, but if he is curtly dismissing dogs to the end without a second glance, you don't even have to go all the way around the ring; just walk over to the end of the line.

Section III

Just about the only piece of equipment that you must have to show your dog yourself is a suitable show lead. I suggest a slip collar and a short leash. Metal show slip collars are of finer links than their obedience counterparts, and some come in gold as well as chrome finish. There is a variety of links available, from "snake chains," to "jeweler's links." As long as the actual chain is sturdy enough for your dog, it doesn't matter what color or shape the links are, whatever you think looks best on your dog!

Alternatives to metal show slip collars are braided or rolled nylon. These generally come in black, brown, beige, and white (as well as other bold colors) to be as unobtrusive as possible and

blend in with the dog's coat color. They have a metal ring at each end, either silver or gold. The color should blend in with the dogs coat, not stand out and visually cut the neck in half.

The ideal lead to use with these show collars is 2-3' in length; see what is the most comfortable length in this range for you and your dog. I prefer a loop lead attached permanently to the collar ring, so that the clip doesn't come off suddenly in the ring, but others like the convenience of a clip. You can also find leads of this size and configuration in leather, braided or rolled nylon, color-coordinated to the show collars. Be cautious when purchasing! Thin nylon leads can really cut into flesh! Don't go all out and buy a fancy beaded lead until you are perfectly comfortable with the length and diameter you prefer.

The lead should feel comfortable in your hand. Some leather leads are quite stiff initially, so try crumpling one up a bit in your hand. If it feels like it will soften up after a few uses, it's probably fine. If it feels harsh and rough, it may always stay that way. If it feels smooth and supple, like glove leather, it may not last for long, as it will tend to stretch and finally snap. If you are considering nylon, the thicker, the better!! Wind it around your hand tightly a couple of turns and then pull on the end of it for a minute. Could you hold your dog without injury if they decide to bolt?

Try several varieties of collars and leads on your dog and see which one he seems both the most comfortable and the most responsive with. The outfit in which you first train your dog may not be the one that you will use for him several months or years downstream. As his training and yours progress, you may find yourself trying out other kinds of leads to enhance or improve specific traits of movement, such as head and neck carriage, response to the handler, etc . Every dog is different, and what works for one may have no effect or even be detrimental to another.

Section IV

Presentation encompasses both how you show your dog and how you show yourself to the judge. Just as different judges favor one pattern of movement over another, they also vary in the procedures that they use to examine each dog in a class individually.

One judge may bring all of the dogs in the class into the ring to be stacked in a line that he will look over, perhaps at some length, before moving the entire group. Another will want to see the entire class in motion around the ring as his first look at these dogs. A third may not move the class as a whole until he has gone over and moved each dog individually. Yet another, may never move the entire class together.

You must pay attention to everything going on, as well as to your dog! Watch what is happening in the line-up ahead of you and move into place accordingly, without the judge having to make a special effort to instruct you.

Whatever his choice of procedure, there will come the moment when the judge approaches your dog to examine or "go over" him. He may take a first look from the side for an overview, so be certain Fido is at his stacked best! Most judges will first approach your dog at his head. Drop your dog's tail and stand beside his right shoulder, holding on to his head until the judge takes the head from you. If he asks you to show him your dog's bite, raise the front of the upper lip with your left hand, and pull down the front of the lower lip with your right. Don't stick your head between the judge and the dog! YOU do not need to see the bite! The only teeth of interest to most bloodhound judges are the six upper and six lower incisors, the teeth in the center of the jaw. Some other breeds require complete dentition and the judges must count the total number of teeth, but fortunately you don't have to worry about this!

After the judge has looked at the bite, drop the lips and let him take the dog's head while you move to the dog's side and stay out of the way, keeping the dog still and steady. This gives the judge enough space to examine the front part of the dog without you in the way. If the judge chooses to check out the dog's bite for himself, move to the side of your dog as soon as the judge has his hands on the head. If your dog is unruly or somewhat hesitant about the judge or the procedure, stay at his shoulder while the judge examines his front, and cup your left hand just behind the top of his head (at the level where the ears are set) to keep him from backing away until the judge is finished with his head.

When the judge is ready to release the dog's head, step up and, stand directly in front of your dog. Take his muzzle in both of your hands. As the judge is examining the hindquarters, hold your dog's head and gently pull the skin, or "shawl" up from his shoulders to his head to show off the amount of skin the dog has, and to offer a correct view of the shoulder assembly. Be sure to keep his muzzle parallel to the ground, so as to not straighten the shoulders

Unless the judge wants you to move your dog individually immediately after he finishes his examination, make sure that all four of your dog's legs are still in the proper position (correct them quickly, if necessary), move to his right side, and hold his head and tail again. This gives the judge a final overview of how all of the pieces that he has just examined fit together.

Pay very close attention to the judge from the time he has completed his individual examinations and has moved the last dog in the class, until he has announced all four of his placements (or however many there are, in classes of less than four.) If you don't receive a placement, congratulate the ones who did, and then quietly walk out of the ring with your dog.

If you receive a placement, immediately walk over to the sign showing the number of the placement that you have received; if you are moving, break out of line and walk directly over to the markers; if you are standing in line stacked up, you may wait until all four have been announced and walk over together. Stand so that the ring steward and the judge can see your armband number. Stay in the ring until the judge hands you your ribbon (and trophy, if any.) Say "thank you," politely and

then walk out of the ring. The ring steward will let you know if your dog will be needed for further judging.

Personal grooming

You will probably spend a fair amount of time and effort in grooming, bathing, brushing, and "spit polishing" your dog for the ring. Since you and your dog make up a team, it is also important that you appear presentable and well-groomed. There are three basic rules for your own appearance, comfort, and success: Don't enter the show ring wearing any item of clothing that displays your name, your dog's name, any dog club logo, or anything else in the way of personal identification. Dress in such a manner that you show respect for the judge, the sport, your dog, and yourself. Wear shoes that give good support and traction for running! They don't have to be hiking boots or track shoes, but sandals and leather soles are definitely out! A good rule of thumb for an outfit is "acceptable mid-management office wear." A few spangles are acceptable, but you should not glitter like you are going to the club!

Clothing specifics for men include no blue jeans. Acceptable attire for a youngster or a novice handler with a young dog is slacks and a shirt or sweater, depending on the weather. Preferred wear is a sports jacket or fitted vest, and you will observe that experienced or professional men handlers will wear suits and ties in the show ring.

Women may wear pants in the ring, but the outfit should be a nicely tailored pantsuit with either a jacket or matching vest. Avoid shorts, and halter, tank, and midriff-baring tops. Skirts or dresses usually make a nice impression; watch the skirt length: too long is awkward to run or kneel in, too short will reveal more than you want to show to onlookers! Also a word on undergarments: Sturdier is better!! It's the dog's movement we want the judge to watch!

Men usually don't have to worry about a pocketless outfit, but the most perfect dress to show off Fido isn't worth a darn if it doesn't have at least one decent sized pocket. You will need somewhere to put your drool rag and bait! All show clothing should be washable, unless you are on close personal terms with your dry cleaner.

Avoid a lot of large or heavy jewelry. It can restrict your movements, get tangled in the lead or your dog's coat, and be distracting to both your dog and the judge. Strongly scented perfumes or cosmetics are also distracting to dogs and some people.

A final word on color: A dog with a lovely outline is best seen against a lighter or complementary shade. Thus you will see people showing red or light liver hounds in black and navy blue and saving paler shades for a black and tan. Generally jewel tones are very complimentary but orange, red or pink can change the tone of your dog's tan, so check the color in a sunlit mirror before you go into the ring. In all cases, however, it is important not to wear a busy print or small bright plaid

skirt, dress, or suit. One or two large bodies of color, or an all-over neutral earth tone color will allow the bulk of attention to remain where it belongs, on your dog!