

The Dog Show Scene: A Beginners Guide

by Mark Sheppard : Southbank Labrador Retrievers
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My wife Bronwyn and I first became actively involved with Labs in 1980 when we purchased our first registered Labrador Retriever – a yellow male which we named Bosun. The breed wasn't new to me as I had grown up with three over a period of 17 years at our family home in Coorparoo. It was never our intention to "do" anything with Bosun – just have him as a family pet. His breeder provided us with a copy of the Labradors in Capricornia handbook and the more that I looked at the photos in the "Winners Circle" section the more an idea started to develop – It might be worth having a closer look at this Dog Show scene purely out of interest.

We attended a few Durack shows "for a look" and very quickly realised that Bosun was never destined to be a Show Dog. In fact I shudder now when I look back at photos of him as a young dog and wonder why I ever thought he could be anything other than a pet, after all that's exactly why we purchased him in the first place! Therein is the very first lesson – you can never hope to rise to the top in the show ring if you don't have a quality animal.

But the bug had bitten – showing and breeding Labrador Retrievers was something that I really wanted to do. I made contact with a well known LRCQ member and at her invitation Bronwyn and I began to tag along to more and more shows. Up until that point I had never actually exhibited in the ring – just watched from the sidelines. On one particular occasion this new found "friend" of mine shoved a lead in my hand (with a black dog on the end of it) and said something like "don't just stand there – the dog is in the next class". I have never been more apprehensive about anything in my life. Cold sweats, clammy palms, an urgent need to visit the gents' – and all this before I had even taken a step into the ring!

The judge was Mr Toby Jenks, a real stalwart of the Queensland Dog World, and he awarded me (the dog) second in the Australian Bred Dog Class. To this day Toby still reminds me of my first "time in the ring" – but he always has a bit of a wry smile on his face when he says it! The important message here is that I survived the ordeal. Often times many beginners allow their fears to overwhelm them to the point where they either get somebody else to show their dog or give up after one or two attempts.

After almost 27 years as active Labrador Retriever exhibitors and breeders it is fair to say that the "type" of dogs and bitches that Bronwyn and I have today are very different from those that we had at the outset. We do prefer dogs and bitches that are outgoing, confident and have that "look at me" attitude. From experience dogs that exhibit this sort of personality are worth their weight in gold in the show ring. If the animal is sound, coupled with a fantastic temperament and overall "breed type" then it is very likely that it will have a long and happy show career.

I think that the best way to share some thoughts and ideas with new comers to the show ring is to break down the process into bite sized chunks. I have listed some of the things that I believe are important in the hope that they will be of benefit to new members. Not everyone will agree with my list but it's what works for me. What I can't guarantee is that I have covered everything – to do so would require a paperback novel.

BEFORE YOU START YOU NEED TO UNDERSTAND & ACCEPT

1. That showing dogs (like many other sports) is very competitive
2. You will have to serve an apprenticeship - this may take quite some time depending upon the quality of the dogs you exhibit and your own handling skills.
3. That there are no "free tickets" to success – it will take a lot of time, commitment and financial investment to achieve your goals
4. That your choice of Labrador "type" may well change as you gain more experience and you start to develop an "eye" for dogs.
5. Support from other family members will be critical to your long term success.

BACKGROUND RESEARCH (before you purchase your first Show Puppy)

- Attend as many Championship Shows as possible to get some basic idea of what's involved
- Introduce yourself as a newcomer to the Labrador Exhibitors on the grounds.
- Ask if you can read their Catalogue of Entries and have them explain the class layout.
- Don't get tied down with the first Labrador person that you meet – dog show grounds are usually big places and Lab exhibitors rarely all sit together in one group.
- Ask the exhibitors what time (and in which ring) they believe Labradors will be judged and plan to be at ringside about 15 minutes beforehand (a folding chair will come in very handy)
- Pay particular attention to what is being said AFTER the judging of Labradors is completed – there is nothing quite like a dog show to bring out a persons real personality.
- If showing is going to be your “thing” then get out and visit the top winning kennels. By top winning I mean “top winning” – most exhibitors believe that their dogs are the best but who actually has the dogs that are consistently at the top.
- When you have decided upon the “type” of Labrador that you like place a firm order (including a deposit) with the breeder for a “show” puppy – buy the very best that you can afford and my firm recommendation would be to purchase a bitch puppy.
- Remember that you may need to wait – a reputable breeder will keep you fully informed of the progress of a particular litter and will tell you if there isn't something of show quality available. I personally never make a final decision regarding show quality until I have run the best 2 or 3 puppies on to 10 weeks.
- Many new comers who stick to it may wish to breed in the future and a young bitch always allows you to progress down this path. A mediocre male will rarely be used at stud by other breeders and you become “married” to a dog that is not paying it's way either in the show ring or a breeding programme.
- Don't expect to get the “pick of the litter” – remember what I said about having to serve an apprenticeship. The breeder won't have the confidence in your ability to campaign a show dog until you get out there and “strut your stuff”.
- Remember that you do need to be a CCC member before you can exhibit at a Championship Show (membership is not a prerequisite to exhibit at Open shows but join anyway). Membership will entitle you to a monthly copy of the Qld Dog World magazine which lists all upcoming shows and events.

NOW THAT YOU HAVE YOUR NEW PUPPY – WHAT HAPPENS NEXT

- Try to establish a circle of contacts within the Labrador show fraternity whose help and advice you can rely upon and value. This will quite often include the breeder of your puppy and other exhibitors who show dogs from this particular kennel.
- The next decision you need to make is the method or style you will use to exhibit your new puppy. Having attended a number of shows you will have noticed that some “stack” (sometimes called top & tail) their dogs by physically placing the dog into show stance whilst others (myself included) prefer to freestand and bait their dogs. Sometimes a combination of the two will suit best.
- Making this choice is important because training your new 8 week old puppy for the show ring starts now!!

SHOW TRAINING

- Show training, like most dog pursuits, is all about repetition and positive reinforcement. Most of all it's about having fun with your puppy. There is nothing worse than having a nice youngster who “just won't show” because it has learned to hate the formality and is completely stressed by the whole ordeal.
- I always use a 6ft cloth show lead matched to the dogs coat colour – these are not easy to use but once mastered provide in my opinion many benefits over heavy choker chains.
- Your new puppy has to first become familiar with having a lead around it's neck – purchase a cheap 3ft cloth lead from your local pet shop and place the lead on your puppy with a knot around the slip ring to stop it from sliding off.
- Let your puppy drag this around each afternoon for about 10 minutes whilst you engage in other “puppy games”. The end of the lead will snag on all sorts of things so be ready to “rescue” the puppy if the need arises. Keep this going for about 4-5 days.
- Having the lead snag occasionally is all part of the training – it very quickly allows the puppy to become accustomed to having something pulling around it's neck.
- After 4-5 days you can begin to pick up the end of the lead and call the puppy in to you giving the lead a slight tug for encouragement.

SHOW TRAINING (cont'd)

- When the puppy comes to you give him lots of praise and then let him gallop off again as part of the game. Do this for a further 2 days and then start to walk with your puppy whilst holding the end of the lead. Don't worry about trying to go in one particular direction – let the puppy lead you around.
- The next step is to introduce "show bait" to the training. One very important point here and that is that show bait should only ever be used for show training and exhibiting. We use baked liver cut into 1" cubes as show bait but kabana or herb sausage can also be used successfully.
- Call your puppy by name and let him get a smell of the bait held in your right hand whilst holding the end of the lead in your left hand.
- He will try to jump up at your hand but force him back with your right knee / shin and tell him to "watch".
- When he stands looking up at you (this may only be for a split second initially) tell him good boy and feed him that small piece of bait and give him lots of praise.
- Set off again with the puppy on the lead but this time have the puppy follow you on your left hand side and "direct" him using the bait in your left hand.
- Just a very small circle will do – then stop and guide your puppy into a position directly facing you and once again tell your puppy to "watch". Swap the bait into your right hand.
- When he does "watch" then reward him with a small piece of bait and lots of praise.
- You don't necessarily have to use the word "watch" as a show command – I have heard many different commands used (stand, show, up) just be sure to use the same word every time whether you are training or exhibiting in the ring.
- After about a week of this initial training it's time to try your hand at using your proper 6ft show lead. This can be so funny to watch that it would rate highly on the "Funniest Home Video Show". All of a sudden you have the puppy on a cloth slip lead without the knot to hold it firmly in place.
- The cloth lead works exactly like a choker chain in that it will tighten around the puppy's neck when pulled against and loosen off when there is no pressure.
- The real trick is to control your puppy's movement so that it doesn't get strangled when on the move and doesn't walk out of the loop when slackened. Show bait is really useful here because you can use it to your advantage by keeping the puppy close to your left leg.
- Do as before – just a small circle and then guide the puppy into a position facing you.
- This time keep the puppy's focus on the bait in your right hand but with your left hand move in closer and slip the lead back down to the puppy's shoulders. Step back and hold the puppy's attention using the watch command. If the puppy tries to "crowd" you then walk in to him and "nudge" him back into a position about 2 ft in front of you.
- Using the bait encourage the puppy to take a small step forward so that he is balanced in his standing position – i.e. front legs falling straight from the shoulder hindquarters well placed, top line level with tail wagging. This is a really interesting skill to master – you would be amazed at how adept you can become at getting your puppy looking "just right" simply by moving him forward or back, left or right, head up higher or lower all with the use of show bait.
- Keep practising this because it will pay dividends in the long run – to have a well trained puppy that just falls into place is fantastic. (Even more fantastic is to see the same puppy in a couple of years time as a mature adult dog being shown to it's full potential in the Best In Show line up!).
- As you and your puppy get better at this it is time to get another family member or friend to "go over" your puppy. Have them check for correct bite and run their hands over the head, down the neck and shoulders, along the top line and down the flanks and finally the tail and hindquarters.
- Remember to praise your puppy as all this is happening because the tendency will be for him to want to turn around and play.

SOCIALISING

- No amount of work in the back yard will compensate for exposure to an actual dog show and introducing your new puppy to this and other environments is critically important.
- Baby puppies can be exhibited from 3 months of age but you won't have taken delivery of your new winner until it reached 8 weeks of age. This means that you only have about 4 weeks of preparation time if you intend exhibiting from the very first show that you are entitled to enter.
- Personally I rarely show a baby puppy before 4 months of age – my reasons are twofold. Firstly the puppy has had more time to mature and socialise and secondly (and most importantly) the permanent immunisation needles have had time to take effect.
- Enquire about puppy training classes in your area and consider attending these on at least 4 occasions before entering your first show. They provide a great avenue for puppy socialising and you can begin to introduce your baby to more formal ringcraft.

SOCIALISING (cont'd)

- Remember too that socialising your puppy must include getting him used to travelling in the car. Initially this may be sitting on the back seat with another family member although I wouldn't recommend it as the distraction levels are high.
- More preferable is to purchase (or borrow) a collapsible show crate which will fit into the back of your vehicle. If you do invest in one of these crates remember to purchase one suitable for an "adult" Labrador so that your puppy can grow into it.
- Give your puppy something to occupy him (a hide chew bone is excellent) so that he associates car travel in a crate with a pleasant experience.

YOUR FIRST DOG SHOW

- In consultation with your breeder you will have chosen the show at which your new baby puppy will make it's debut and have entered accordingly.
- On the day of the show arrive in plenty of time (most non summer season shows commence at 9.00am) and set up your "campsite". This is where your show crate really comes into it's own as you can have your puppy safely in it's crate either at your campsite or at ringside knowing that he is safe and secure.
- Arrange to meet fellow exhibitors at the show and they can assist you with setting up and also help to calm your nerves. Please remember to collect your numbers from the Show Secretary – these must be displayed using a number clip.
- Keep an eye on the progress of judging – most judges average around 40 dogs per hour. If there are 80 dogs before the first Labrador baby dog entry then it is fair to assume that Labs would be required 2 hours after the commencement of judging.
- In our case Labradors are in the Gundog Group (Group 3) and judging proceeds alphabetically commencing with Cocker Spaniels and concluding with Weimaraners.
- The ring steward will call the numbers of each dog required according to the Class entered.
- Please make sure that you answer your call so that the steward is aware of your attendance at ringside. There is nothing worse than to be called absent simply because you were not organised and up at ringside in sufficient time.
- The ring steward usually introduces the Class to the judged – "Sir this is your baby puppy dog class" after which you will be asked to move into the ring (it's about this time that you think you're going to need to have an ambulance on standby!!).
- Move in to the ring in numerical order – in a class of four or five baby puppy dogs you may be first into the ring at the head of the class or last but either way now is the time when your training and puppy socialising must pay off.
- It is natural for baby puppies to want to play and I personally don't mind a bit of fun as you move in with the others as a class – where you do want some level of control is when the time comes for the judge to "go over" your puppy individually.
- Now your show training will really pay dividends – as the judge completes his judging of the baby puppy in front of you there is an opportunity to get your baby alert, freestanding and baiting with it's full attention on you.

WHAT WILL THE JUDGE BE LOOKING FOR

- The judge will usually take a moment to view your puppy from a short distance away and this allows him a get an overall snapshot and assess visible quality
- He will then approach your puppy from the front and ask for the age of the puppy
- I normally quote the age in the early classes in weeks (12 weeks or 15 weeks) rather than months. There can be a big difference in size between a baby puppy that is 12 weeks old and one that is almost 16 weeks old. If you quote the age as 3 months then you run the risk of the judge assuming that your baby may be a little on the small side compared to others in the class.
- Next he will want to check that your baby has a correct scissor bite – this can be a bit difficult particularly if your baby is still teething but your show training should carry you through here.
- Then he will go over your puppy whilst all the time keeping in mind the breed standard and how closely he believes your puppy matches his interpretation of that standard.
- Finally you will be asked to "do a triangle" which quite simply means moving directly away from the judge anticlockwise with your puppy nearest your left leg so that hind action can be assessed, doing a left hand turn and moving parallel with the judge so that reach, drive and balance can be determined and finally another left hand turn and returning straight back to the judge so that front movement can be assessed.

WHAT WILL THE JUDGE BE LOOKING FOR (cont'd)

- When you return to the judge you can once again freestand and bait your puppy so that he is in full show stance allowing the judge the opportunity of a final assessment. You will then be asked to return to your position in the class.
- Once judging of all entrants in your class has been completed the judge will place the dogs in his preferred order of first, second or third.
- If all of your planning and training has paid off you may be placed first.
- If so wait on the first place marker until the steward has announced the numbers of the place getters.
- If you haven't been placed in first, second or third place you are free to leave the ring.
- Remember to congratulate the winners and always wait until the judging of the breed has been fully completed and you have been asked to clear the assembly area.

NOW IT'S TIME TO DO AN AFTER SHOW POST MORTEM

- Please don't drop your bundle if your puppy wasn't highly placed in it's class.
- Be very wary about getting caught up in the grumbling – there can only be one winner per class, one Challenge Certificate for dog and bitch awarded and one Best of Breed. Mathematically this means that there will always be more disappointed people at a dog show than happy ones.
- Remember that you entered the show and paid money to get the judges opinion of your puppy – whether you (or any of your friends) believe that your puppy is a world beater means absolutely nothing when you enter the show ring.
- Ask yourself – did I give my baby puppy every opportunity to “sparkle” or are there areas where I need to improve in the future.
- This was your first time in the ring and other exhibitors may have had many years of experience and had the skill to exhibit their puppy to it's full potential.
- Keep practising at home and at puppy training classes and keep entering shows – the only way to improve is to keep at it. The more experience that you and your puppy can get the easier it all becomes.

OTHER TIPS

- Whilst practice and experience is important sometimes you need to give your puppy a break.
- Many exhibitors make the mistake of not recognising that their young dog (or older dog for that matter) has become bored with the whole dog show thing.
- Having a fortnight or a month off can have lots of benefits for you and your dog – you both come back refreshed and raring to go and once again it becomes an exciting outing rather than a “routine”.
- Go to the beach and let your puppy have a swim, spend a day at the park having a picnic with the family – do anything but don't go to a dog show!
- And finally – remember to have fun. When it is no longer fun it's time to give it all away and take up golf.

