

Volume 37, Issue 4

JULY/AUGUST 2009

THE COURIER®

THE OFFICIAL PUBLICATION OF THE PORTUGUESE WATER DOG CLUB OF AMERICA, INC.

Best In Show: A Dream Goal

by Tammy Hibberson

Breed Championship: Owner Handling vs. Hiring a Pro

by Cathy Dugan

Tribute to Kitty Braund

by Joanne Forsythe

PWDs assist Captains on Safe/Sea Rescue Boats

by Phil LeBlanc and Sally Andrews

NEW CHAMPIONS
RESCUE & RELOCATION
PET & VETERAN PORTRAITS



Owner Handling vs. Hiring a Professional to achieve a Breed Championship

Is one method better than the other?

By Cathy Dugan, Aviator Kennel

Showing pedigreed dogs is unique.

It's one of the few sports where professionals compete directly with amateurs.

At local dog shows, we'll see lots of owner handlers in the ring, often with great success.

But it often seems like the professionals have the advantage...and the truth be known...They do!

It's their job and it is our hobby and recreation.

For well over 20 years at Aviator Kennel here in Northern California, I've been a breeder, handler, co-owner, kennel operator and now an AKC judge. I've had the chance to see the merits of owner handlers and professional handlers from just about every viewpoint. Is one better than the other? The answer is "it depends" on what you want to achieve. If you show your own dog because you enjoy it and you like to go to dog shows, that may be the way to go. If you want more than that out of the experience, there are more things to consider.

I started with Dalmatians; a breed that is mostly owner-handled even today. I have personally finished over 30 Dalmatians myself and when I moved to Portuguese Water Dogs it seemed like a natural transition to show my own dogs. It wasn't so easy. With Dals, grooming is relatively easy; it's more than just hosing them down, but it's nothing like getting a PWD ready for the show ring. The grooming really does matter in our breed. So, I'd have a professional

groomer prep my dogs for show weekends and I'd do the finishing touches just before ring time.

Like most breeders, I enjoy showing my dog from the Bred by Exhibitor class and continue to finish at least one dog from this class every year. The purpose of this class is to provide breeders a chance to show what they feel is the best they have to offer as a breeder. The dog I take to this class is an example of what I think as a breeder that a PWD ought to be like. Showing from this class gives a breeder pride of ownership, credibility as a breeder and the sheer joy of presenting your BEST! While I enjoy going to dog shows, very few puppy owners want to get that involved with showing their dog. That's why we regularly use the services of a professional handler.

Owner handlers versus Professionals – The Pros and Cons

Some owner handlers think they can save money by showing their own dog. If you look at the cost-benefit of this thinking, that's probably not true. You will likely need to pay someone to show groom your dog. And then, you still have to pay the cost of entries, travel, gas, food and motels. We did the math and found it to be cheaper to send a dog with a professional handler than to go ourselves every weekend.

Another challenge for owner handlers is whether they have the time and energy to do what it takes to be successful in the ring. Can you go to shows and sit ring side and watch handlers you like and how they work in the ring? Can you copy their techniques so you can develop your own style? Can you work with professional handlers so they can help you become a better owner handler? Most handlers are very open and helpful, but remember, they do this for a living.

The old saying is that a lawyer who represents himself has a fool for a client. As good as the lawyer might be, he'll never do the same job as a fellow professional. It's not so different in the dog world. You have 2 to 2½ minutes in the show ring to convince a judge that you have the best dog in the



Cathy Dugan in 1998 with her first PWD BBEX Champion "Sailor."

ring. There is a lot of preparation before you even get to the ring. Training your dog to stand for exam, gait correctly on the leash, show proper temperament and stability as well as demonstrating and selling your dog's best features is critical. As breeder, owner handler and a judge, I want dogs to be well presented, well-conditioned and well groomed to give the dog its best advantage.

Be honest with yourself about the quality of your dog. You can ask advice of your breeder and your professional handler. Winning as an owner handler requires you to know your dog's faults and virtues. To be competitive try these techniques:

- Practice in front of a mirror, stacking your dog so you know what the judge is seeing.
- Teach your dog to stack and free stack using Happy Legs stack blocks.
- Have a friend video your movement with the dog to determine the best speed for your dog.
- Consistently condition your dog by running or using a treadmill.

Myths and Truths about Professional Handlers

Judges give extra preference to professionals:
FALSE.

What judges do appreciate are handlers who consistently and honestly show their dogs to them week after week, show after show. The job of a professional is to promote the virtues of a dog and downplay faults. They know which side of the dog is the best and will do everything they can to keep that side in front of the judge. Professionals know when they have a dog that doesn't move particularly well, or crosses over in the down-and-back. They know how to move the dog to minimize how this looks in front of the judge.

Professional handlers are more objective about our dogs:
ABSOLUTELY TRUE.

As breeders and owners we all fall in love with every one of our dogs. It's why we breed dogs in the first place; we love PWDs! Handlers do this for a living. They're not on the road every week all over the country to show dogs they know are not going to win if they can help it. Their job is to gently and honestly tell a breeder or an owner what the PWD they have is capable of doing. Thousands of PWDs have become champions; very few make it to the top 20 and even fewer to the top ten of any category.

The bottom line: Owner Handler or Professional?

Remember, when we show our own dogs it's our entertainment. For a professional, it's their job and their livelihood. A determined owner handler can become very competitive in the show ring if they're willing to put in the

hours of practice, training, ring side viewing, tracking and understanding judges, grooming, conditioning, and the demands of preparing your dog for the ring. (*Editor's Note: See article by Tammy Hibberson on page 16*). Ask yourself two questions: Can I groom my dog as well as a professional groomer? Can I consistently show my dog to its best advantage at each show I attend? Unless the answer to both questions is a confident "yes," you may want to consider the use of a professional handler.

Good handlers will become your partner with your dog, working with you to ensure that the dog shows at the best level that is possible with your dog.

If you decide to hire a professional:

- Treat the relationship like a professional arrangement.
- Develop a long-term relationship through the use of a contract. Every professional handler can provide you with a rate sheet so you'll know what to expect for costs.
- Check in with your handler at their set-up and assess how they treat their dogs.
- If you have confidence in your handler, then it will be a long and healthy relationship.

Finally, remember that it's all about the dog. I've had PWDs that I thought were special, but in truth I know after years of shows and over 50 champions that only a few have that extra quality that makes them #1. We've all seen it in the ring; some dogs gait like dancers and stand like statues – they love to compete – the applause is for them alone. Dogs like that deserve the touch of a professional and the unconditional love of their owners and breeders. Only you can decide what's best for you and your dog. Good luck!

Other resources:

1. *Successful Dog Showing*, by Robert and Jane Forsyth
2. *How To Show Your Own Dog*, by Virginia Tuch Nichols
3. *Born To Win*, by Patricia Craig Trotter
4. *Handing Secrets Uncovered*, order info at www.edoca.org. Purchase of this DVD supports Concerned Dog Owners in their fight against anti-dog legislation.



Cathy Dugan in 2007 with "Lady Bug," finished from the BBEX class.