

Approaching the Ridgeback

By Denise Flaim

When it comes to a judge's decisions in distributing ribbons, there's no pleasing all of the people -- much less all the exhibitors -- all of the time. But what is universally appreciated by Ridgeback fanciers is a judge who knows how to approach our dogs.

The Ridgeback standard calls for a dog that is "devoted and affectionate to his master, reserved with strangers." "Reserved" is hardly the same as "wary"; a Ridgeback never responds to the approach of someone he does not know with aggression or intolerance. Instead, he will observe, calmly and intently, doing an excellent impression of a marble statue as he tries to understand the newcomer's intent. If the stranger is relaxed and calm, the Ridgeback will respond in kind. Ours is not a suspicious breed, but rather a deeply intuitive and intelligent one. If you are nervous, they figure you have cause to be.

Some judges, especially those who hail from the Working Group, misinterpret the Ridgeback's intense gaze as a challenge and threat instead of what it truly is -- a simple, honest, thoughtful study. If the judge shows apprehension, this initiates a self-fulfilling prophecy: The Ridgeback might shrink away, lean against his handler or break his stack.

Perhaps the biggest trap judges fall into in understanding Ridgeback temperament is going no further than the breed's imposing exterior. Some do not appreciate that under the stoicism there is a sensitive soul not very far removed from his sighthound roots. He is just as brainy as he is athletic, with a houndy independence does not permit him to automatically believe the assurances of his handler, as a Sporting dog might. For this reason, a handler who corrects or jerks an anxious Ridgeback in the ring often has the opposite effect intended.

In contrast to the heavy-handed judge who scrutinizes teeth as if they were tea leaves and slaps rears in a locker-room flashback is the one who attempts to "baby" a nervous Ridgeback by cooing and lingering. If a dog is worried about a stranger's intentions, such cloying behavior will likely only exacerbate that concern. As with many things in this breed, the middle ground -- calm, gentle and collected -- is best.

Another bugaboo of Ridgeback handlers is the judge who swoops in from

behind. The correct way to approach a Ridgeback is from his line of sight; these are agile hunters who do not appreciate being "ambushed." The judge who touches a flank unannounced, causing a Ridgeback to whip around, has no one to blame for the dog's poor performance but himself.

Similarly, judges who force puppies to stand for an exhaustive exam when they are clearly overwhelmed are not doing that dog any favors. Yes, puppies should have some training for the ring. But the Ridgeback's first impressions are lasting ones, and pushing a puppy too far can create a negative association that will be hard, if not impossible, to extinguish. The show ring is not the place to "teach" a panicked Ridgeback puppy how to behave. Instead, a quick, smooth exam that ends on a positive note -- ideally, proffering a piece of bait -- is infinitely preferable.

If they are anything, Ridgebacks are impeccable judges of character. They know when a judge of the human variety likes and understands their breed. And they know -- mirroring it back quite plainly -- when one does not.

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