

Backing away: Why some dogs fear Judges

Posted by Peter Frost: Top Dog Handling

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An illustration in the lack of belief in the handlers TOP DOG status.

There can be any number of triggers that cause a dog to be wary but it's not what causes this to happen as much as what you do about it that matters.

Judges with hats. Judges in raincoats. Judges in long, flowing skirts. Judges who stare. Judges who hurl headlong toward your dog. These are just some of the scenarios that your dog has to face when a judge approaches them. If we leave the decision as to whether they should be fearful or not, then the decision our dog makes, might not be the decision we were hoping for in the show ring.

Consider this, for example. A team of zoologists following a pack of wild wolves on a hunt in Northern Europe were amazed to observe exactly how influential the decision making of the alpha of the pack can be while observing a challenge by a bull reindeer to protect the herd. Now, bull reindeer are not "Bambi". They can weigh upwards of 600Kg (1200 pounds) and are capable of killing wolves with a single kick let alone what they can do using their antlers. What amazed the zoologists was when a bull reindeer charged the herding wolves, if the alpha wolf held its ground, then all of the hunting pack would also hold their ground. Just as amazing, if the alpha wolf decided discretion was the better part of valor and left the hunt, all the pack would leave the hunt too. Even a young wolf that had previously challenged the alpha to lead the hunt (and lost) would not turn and bark at the bull reindeer. This illustrates just how reliant the pack is on the judgment of the alpha even when it comes to life and death.

The point is, if your dog is prone to backing away from the judge, then it's up to you to assume the role of TOP DOG. You can do this by applying the following.

YOUR POSTURE Stand tall: Do not lower yourself to nurture or console your dog of the impending danger i.e. the approaching judge, or reduce your height to the dog like you might if you are consoling a small child. Dogs interpret this human signal as a dog, not as a human and, to them, lowering yourself is an indication that you're fearful and don't want to be the leader. If this happens, then they must assume the role as TOP DOG. This means they must decide whether to run or stay. If you are the TOP DOG then this decision is yours – not your dogs.

POSITION Do not stand back behind your dog when the judge is approaching. This positioning puts your dog in the lead and thus in the role of decision maker. Place yourself as near to the front left eye line of your dog as you can. This lets your dog see that you're there and assessing what danger the judge represents. While you're doing this, make sure that you give the complete appearance of being calm and confident.

SIGNAL Your first signal should be a calming, voice aid to gain your dog's attention. Then, as outlined above, you use a sight aid to project stillness and calm. The third signal is touch (remember, all your signals should be calming), which requires you to gently apply pressure on the lead until your dog can feel the contact. You can then ease off the lead so that it is taut but not tight.

SHOW THE TEETH Distract your dog's attention away from the approaching judge and back to you by making a calming sound and exposing the bite. Make sure that you indicate your intention of showing the teeth to the judge when they are no closer than one meter (yard) away from your dog. You can find out more about showing the teeth [here](#).

USE THE YOKE Once you've shown the judge your dog's teeth; place your hand with thumb and forefinger open behind your dog's occiput to display their head in the manner of being very proud of such a quality specimen. **PERSISTENCE** Keep practicing. Remember, the TOP DOG is the one who never, never, EVER gives up Make **this promise to your dog: If a situation is dangerous and you run away, your dog can run with you BUT if you decide that it's safe to stand your ground, then your dog must stand with you.**