

HANDS-ON HANDLING

By Adrienne Bancker

With assistance from Meghan Bassel and Diane Dittrich

And semi-cooperation from Ch. Benton Ivy League UD, Ch Rwyn Heavens Telstar UD, and Briarbane Technicolor
(plus some old photos)

Hey! I got
me a show
dog!
Now what do
I do?



Merriam-Webster On-line Thesaurus:

Entry Word: **HANDLE**

Function: *verb*

Text: **1** to deal with (something) usually skillfully or efficiently <as host of a live TV talk show, she must *handle* any situation that comes up>

Synonyms contend (with), cope (with), grapple (with), manage, maneuver, manipulate, negotiate, swing, treat

Related Words bring off, carry out, pull, swing; command, direct, guide, steer; control, regulate, run

Phrases have a grip on

Near Antonyms botch, bungle, goof (up), louse up, mess (up)

Antonyms fumble, muddle (through)

2 to behave toward in a stated way <*handles* all requests the same, whether they come from long-time customers or new ones> -- see [TREAT 1](#)

3 to control the mechanical operation of <in shop we learned how to *handle* basic woodworking power tools> -- see [OPERATE 1](#)

4 to look after and make decisions about <Mom takes care of the flower beds, and Dad *handles* all the lawn care> -- see [CONDUCT 1](#)

Yup, that about covers it!

How many times have you been in the ring and you have had to: deal with; get a grip on; grapple; control; make decisions about; muddle through; maneuver; fumble; and, yes, even bungle your two minutes allowed for highlighting your dog's conformation and movement to the judge?

Have you ever come out of the ring dejected over your loss because you knew you had the better dog? Have you ever stopped to look at another dog and thought, "How the heck did they win"?

Have you ever thought that the *Professionals* win because it's all political anyway?

One word: Handling.

Chances are good that the dog was better presented than yours in the small amount of time the handler had to show the judge. The handler knew the dog's good and weak points and knew what to emphasize and what to minimize. I remember one time when Meghan Bassel, then Riese, came out of the Juniors ring with the second place ribbon. We all tried to tell her that she had done a good job and should be pleased. Meghan sort of shrugged and replied, "I was out-cuted". Face it...most of us are not going to out-cute Meghan, so learning how to present our dogs properly is our only recourse. Unfortunately, none of us has the perfect dog; fortunately, handling skills can help minimize that fact.

The following article will attempt to illustrate some handling techniques I have learned or observed over the past many years. For a light touch I have recreated some ... um... unique presentation styles I have seen in the Welsh Springer ring at actual point shows. Let me state now, that in no way do I even pretend that I am a perfect handler. I have, however, been able to compete relatively successfully against professional handlers, (as have many others in our breed), and I have been fortunate to have had/have some good dogs. In the show world, an average dog presented well can often beat a better dog poorly presented. A good dog presented well is hard to beat. Several good dogs all presented well makes competition fun.

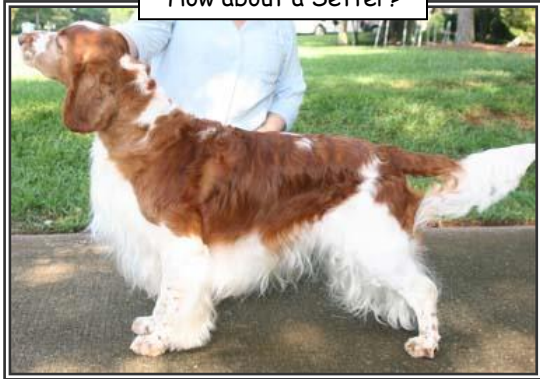
I want to thank the dogs and handlers who put up with the pokes and prods, settings and resetting that were needed for this article. Good humor and wagging tails kept the sessions relatively cool in the steamy Atlanta photo shoots. Okay...let's get started

WHEN YOU THINK OF A WELSH SPRINGER, DO YOU THINK OF

A Foxhound?



How about a Setter?



An American Cocker?



Or maybe a Camel (would that be Dromedary?)



How about something to lean on?



IF YOU ANSWERED "NO" TO ANY OF THESE EXAMPLES, HOW COME WE SEE IT SO MANY TIMES IN THE SHOW RING????

HOW IS A WELSH SPRINGER SPANIEL PRESENTED IN THE SHOW RING?

- The handler is kneeling* on the dog's right side.
- The handler's right hand is underneath the chin holding the head level (parallel with the ground).
- The dog's front legs are placed so that the elbows are set under, in line with, the withers.
- The elbows are against the body, the front toes are pointing forward.
- The hind legs are set as wide apart as the hips.
- The rear pasterns are perpendicular to the ground when viewed from the side and parallel to each other when viewed from behind.
- The topline is level, not sloping, nor dipping, but still showing the slight arch of loin and gently rounded croup.
- The tail is level with the flow of the topline. The handler's left hand is either placed underneath the tail near the dog's body to keep the tail level, or if the dog has been trained to hold its tail out on its own, the left arm is at the handler's side.
- The collar is, typically** removed before the judge's examination.

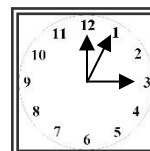


* There are acceptable circumstances for standing when presenting the dog; these are discussed later in the article.

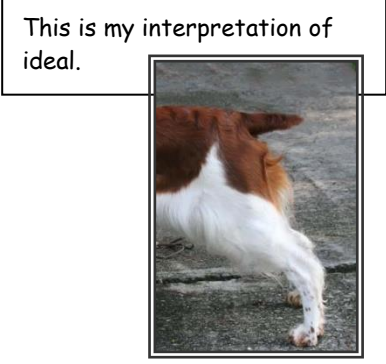
** Unless you are free-stacking your dog, the Welsh Springer is typically presented with the collar removed. In today's shows, the classes are usually small, the judging is quick, or the judge is unfamiliar with traditional spaniel presentation. It is, therefore, acceptable to leave the lead on for the individual examination in the breed ring. In the group ring, remove the collar during the individual exam unless the judge specifically tells you otherwise. When taking your winning photo, always remove the collar to present a clean flow of the head to the neck to the shoulders.

SO, WHAT THE HECK DO I DO WITH THE TAIL?

Whether or not your dog's tail is docked, the tail should still be level (3:00) coming off the topline. It should never be pegged at 1:00. And if your dog is proudly holding his own tail at 12:00 High, then I suggest you take over the tail-holding responsibilities at set-up time.



No butts about it...the standard says: "The tail is an extension of the topline. Carriage is nearly horizontal or slightly elevated when the dog is excited. "



Showing a dog with an undocked tail certainly is a new experience – for everyone. There isn't any right or wrong way to do it. Personally, because it is easier for me, I prefer holding the long tail at the natural taper -- which is where it would have ended had it been docked—and letting the rest go where it wants. Other people hold their dog's tail out full length. We all experiment with what looks best for our dog. I have observed Scandinavian handlers taking the end of the tail and tucking it in the sleeve of their jacket. Others have taken the tail and twisted the 'flag' portion back to the right so the appearance resembles a docked tail. If you are lucky and your undocked dog has a good tail set and a relatively straight carriage all the way out to the tip I would recommend teaching your dog to hold his tail on his own, and then, you don't have to worry about it one way or the other.



WHEN TO STAND -- WHEN TO KNEEL

As I stated earlier, the handler typically kneels to present the dog to the judge. This is not bowing to the judge, crouching over the dog or squatting behind the catcher's mound. It is putting two knees on the ground, feet behind you, (maybe using your toes as a balance and your butt resting on your heels), and your upper torso straight, with shoulders back. Ladies, please remember if you are wearing a skirt - keep your knees together, and don't bend at the waist unless the skirt is long. If you are wearing a shirt with a scoop-neck practice bending over in the mirror - are your breasts tucked-in? (I won't use the photos for this article, but I have learned more about some handlers than I have ever wanted to know. It could be a funny article though -- Our Most Embarrassing Accidental Exposures.)

When it is recommended to stand:

- Your dog
 1. Stands still.
 2. Stands squarely with all four feet pointing in the same direction.
 3. Bait to your hand/face.
 4. Has an excellent neck, shoulder set, topline and tail set.If you cannot answer yes to all of the above, I would not recommend you free-stack your dog or you could end up creating a picture of a pigeon-toed, elbow-swinging, ewe-necked, cow-hocked red & white goat.
- Your dog is fussing. Standing up gives you a better position to control the dog's movements and in dog language it tacitly tells them that you are the one in control.
- You are the only one in the class and the judge doesn't give enough time for you to properly set up your dog. You can still set the legs and feet as you need to, but usually the judge is approaching the dog before you have time to do anything else.
- You know that once you are down, there just ain't no getting back up again.

When it is recommended to kneel:

- You have the time in the class to set up the dog, remove the collar and present the dog. Usually for the best of breed or group individual exam you have enough time to set up while the dog ahead of you is doing its individual movement.
- You need to manually manipulate parts of the body. With a dog the size of our Welsh, it is easier to apply pressure here or there to neck and topline, or, to reset legs when you are at the same level as the dog.
- You have a young dog or puppy that is more secure with you at its side, or, you need to help the dog work through a problem.
- The only chance you have of winning is with a good, long prayer.

In competitive obedience, the best idea is to teach your dog both the left and right finish so you can use whichever one you need based on the situation. I recommend that you teach your dog to stack with you kneeling and to stack with you standing up. You never really know when you will need one or the other.

Whether standing or kneeling, make sure you are not hovering over the dog.



COLLAR ON? COLLAR OFF?

I think everyone knows my feeling by now. I am a definite pro- collar off person. I dislike seeing a Welsh presented with the handler using the collar as a means to hold the head up. I do, however, recognize that there are times when keeping the collar on are necessary. My argument is that most handlers do not recognize the picture they are creating. If the judge requests you keep the collar on, or you are concerned about removing the collar on the dog, then place the collar in

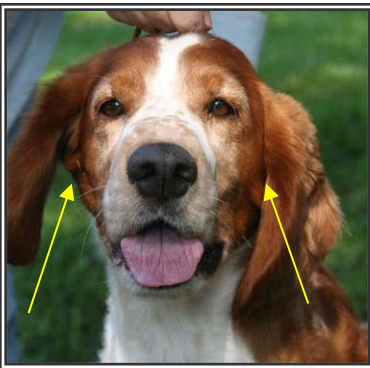
the small indentation between the head and the neck, leave it there and continue holding the head as you would without the collar. I really don't understand where this trend started. Perhaps, some people saw professional handlers doing it, the pros won and the owners copied the pros.

If you hold the head up by using the collar, you are more inclined to:

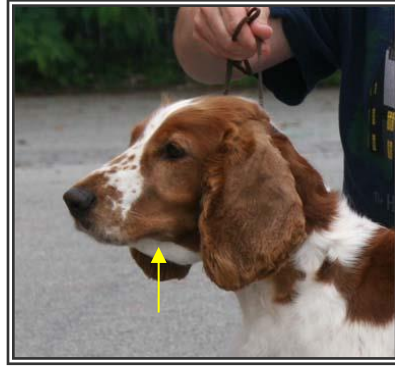
- Pull the nose up and the skull down because the dog doesn't want to lean on the collar. This causes the dog to lose the blend of the head into the neck and the arch of neck.
- Bunch up the skin behind the back skull, creating a harsh expression on your dog or making the head look too broad.
- Cause the dog to look throaty because the neck skin is caught up in the collar.
- Peg the tail. I don't know why this phenomenon occurs, but it is the rare handler who can hold a head up by the collar and still keep the tail level with the topline.

If you want to show your dog by using the collar, then I recommend you practice the proper way to do it. Make sure your dog is comfortable with the collar and will stand either with his nose down so that the neck line is maintained or, better yet, with his nose level as if the collar isn't there. Make sure you do not bunch up any skin around the collar. And practice keeping the tail level by keeping you left hand low. If your right hand is higher because you are holding the collar up, then your left hand naturally tends to drift upwards also. You are showing a Welsh Springer not a Welsh Terrier. Do what is correct for the breed not what is the fashion of the day.

COLLAR ON DON'T



Don't pull the collar up and forward



Don't catch the throat skin up in the collar.

COLLAR ON DO

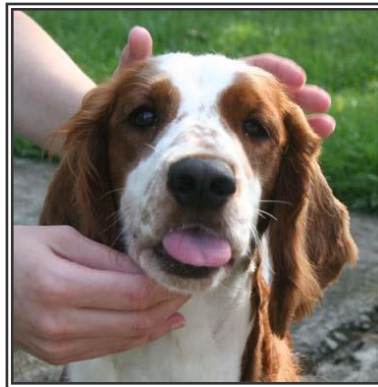


Keep the collar back in the natural indentation between head and neck while keeping the throat clean.

COLLAR OFF DON'T

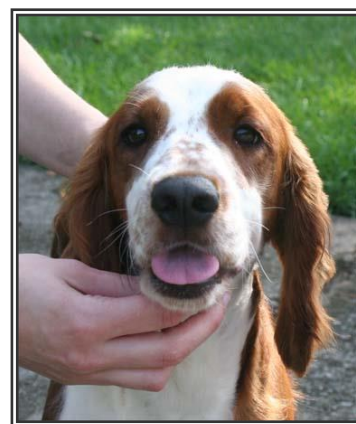


Don't cover the foreface with your fingers.



Don't have your hands all over the back skull.

COLLAR OFF DO



Gently hold the head with your right hand. If you need to steady the dog, keep your left hand inconspicuous.

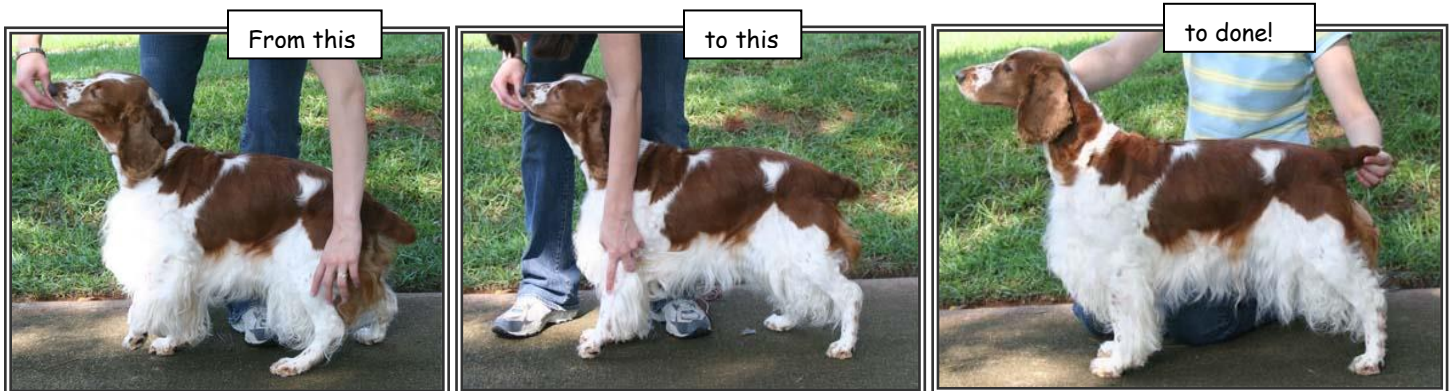
WAIT ON THE BAIT!

Bait is a very useful tool in the ring. It should not, however, be obvious. There are times when judicious use of bait will work to your advantage. For example, a puppy in a large class may get very bored or distracted; a small piece of bait the puppy can gnaw on can help keep their attention and interest. You may also have a fussy bitch in season; bait may be the only thing that gets her mind off of one end and on to another. When baiting a dog, be aware of the judge and when (s)he approaches. Which of these dogs allows the judge a positive first impression of the head and expression?



THE FUSSY DOG

Setting up your dog should be a simple procedure. Set up the legs, get the tail, get the head and you are done. But sometimes the dog does not want to cooperate. In that event, I stand up and use bait to distract the dog while I manipulate the legs. I will let the dog chew on the bait while I move the front and rear legs – an effort that takes only a few seconds (because I practiced—further in the article) When I have the legs where I want them, I will kneel down to finish presenting the dog. The best thing to do is set up the part of the dog that needs the most help first. If the judge is fast and you don't have time to finish setting up, at least the weaker points are minimized.



WHICH ONE OF THESE PUPPY BITCHES WILL WIN HER CLASS?

The following reenactment was taken from a class of 6-9 puppy bitches from a National Specialty several years ago. Assuming that all puppies moved well and had no major problems, if you were a judge looking at the final line up, which one would you consider first?



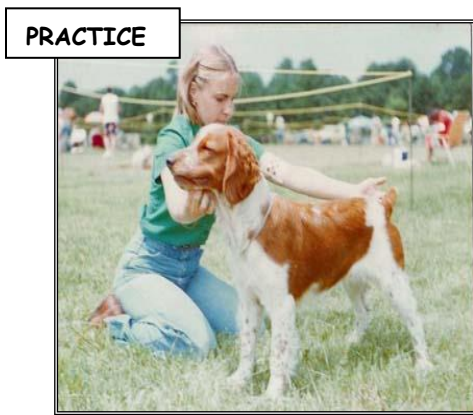
HINTS TO IMPROVE HANDLING

Some of these I learned through competitive obedience training, some through various seminars I have attended (including a very entertaining George Alston handling seminar). Most of these are very simplistic, but people get nervous showing their dogs and forget the basics. Maybe you will find something helpful here.

- ✓ Make sure you can walk and trot a straight line. If you weave or drift, then the dog has to compensate and that will affect movement.
- ✓ If you are gaiting on mats, make sure to keep the dog, not you, in the center of the mat.
- ✓ Learn to move at the speed that is best for the dog, even if it is not your natural speed. Have an experienced person help you determine the speed and then burn it into your muscle memory. Using a metronome can help you with cadence and will be easier for you to keep the memory of the beat in your head.
- ✓ Practice setting up your dog by using a mirror; that way you can see the results immediately. Set up the dog the way you think is correct and then look at your reflection. Does your dog look good or do you need to re-adjust something? Reset your dog by making the adjustment and then look back in the mirror. Do not make the adjustment by looking in the mirror as you do it – because there won't be a mirror in the ring for you to rely on. Learn how to set up your dog so that your dog looks correct the first time you look at your reflection.
- ✓ Now that you have learned how to set up the dog correctly, increase your speed so that you can set the dog up properly as fast as possible. If it takes you a minute, learn to do it in 45 seconds, then thirty seconds, etc. The goal is: front foot, front foot, hind foot, hind foot, tail, head. What's that, 5, maybe, 6, seconds?
- ✓ Learn to have quiet hands. Put jingle-bells (Christmas decorations are great for this) on your wrists and listen to how much noise you make while setting up and gaiting your dog. If the bells are ringing, then your hands are moving and fidgeting. Practice setting up and gaiting your dog without jingling the bells. Learn to make your hand movements quiet, steady and purposeful without extra movement. The dog will appreciate it, also.
- ✓ Learn to fade in the background. The best handlers are the inconspicuous ones. We have all seen handlers where Mr. X. X. SHOWS a dog and we have seen handlers where Mr. Y. Y. shows a DOG. Sit and watch groups where you can learn a lot in a small amount of time. Watch the best handlers; you will notice that the dog looks good and you barely see the handler do anything. Compare that to the handler who is showboating, tossing bait, moving in big sweeping motions. Think of it as Dressage versus Rodeo Roping.
- ✓ Be mindful of your facial expressions. Don't look at the judge as if you are pleading for your life or worse, threatening theirs. Keep a pleasant expression on your face. If you are not a big, natural smiler, don't force it, but don't look angry either. If you are like me and tend to concentrate on what you are doing and not what you look like, be mindful that your facial expressions can be a real hoot at ringside. Learn how to keep your

expression calm and pleasant. A good place to practice this is on the job with some of your co-workers reading emails regarding work place policy. If you can keep a calm, pleasant expression there, then the show ring is no challenge.

- ✓ Train your dog before you come to the dog show. If your dog knows how to gait on a loose lead without bouncing or sniffing the floor, can make the about turn without breaking stride, can do left turns without bumping, can halt, be stacked and then stand there quietly while the judge examines him, you have half the battle won. Puppies are an exception. As far as I am concerned they can bounce as much as they want, they just have to learn that dog shows are fun. But, for goodness sake, don't use the dog show as the first venue to lead-break your puppy.
- ✓ Present your dog to the judge as if you have a something wonderful to show them. If you don't think you have something special, why should the judge?
- ✓ Finally... Your mother was right ...



MAKES PERFECT