

## Setting realistic goals for showing dogs

Many of us step foot in the ring without a clear goal in mind. Sure, we are there 'to win', we believe that our dog is the most deserving, and we cross our fingers and hold our breath when the judge makes their final decision. When we win, we're happy, and when we don't... well very few of us can leave a show empty handed, day after day, and still feel excited about coming back next weekend. I say we *change* that.

No, I'm not talking about changing the way shows are judged, making everyone 'winners' so we can feel proud of ourselves. That devalues the win and doesn't help anyone in the long run. What I *am* talking about is setting realistic, attainable goals; goals that we have complete control over.

An Outcome Goal is something like "I want to win the Major on Saturday". It doesn't take into account all the factors involved, such as the skill of the handler, training of the dog, experience of the judge, the quality of the competition, and whether there is enough competition to make a Major (to name a few). Many of us set Goals like this, and it's really hard to learn from them. If your goal is to 'win the Major', what steps can you take to help you achieve that goal? Well, you can study the likes and dislikes of the Judge, and hope he likes your dog. You can scout out your competition, and hope your dog measures up against them. You can keep your fingers crossed that there wasn't a mistake in the entry count, and nobody is absent to break the Major. Finally, you can work on your own performance, the only thing in this scenario that you have any control over. It seems that the odds are stacked against you achieving your goal, as your goal is only to win, and doesn't focus on *how* you are going to win.

A Performance Goal is different. Instead of focusing on winning that Major, for which you have little control over, you are instead putting focus on one area of your performance. Let's say your Goal is for your dog to land the perfect stack at the end of the down and back. This is something tangible, you can practice it, and achieving the goal has nothing to do with the other dogs in the ring or who the judge points at. If you do achieve your goal, you've mastered an important skill, and have a better shot at winning that Major, and if not, you have something to work on before the next time you enter the ring.

Goals should be able to be evaluated. After your performance, look back and determine if you were able to achieve your goal. If not, why not? What can you do to ensure you achieve your goal next time? In our example of the perfect stack, we can say "The stack wasn't achieved because there was a barking dog in the next ring and it spooked my dog. To achieve my goal in the future, I will practice with my dog in a variety of areas to ensure he won't spook in the future." We can't say this about the Outcome Goal of winning the major, maybe you lost because the other dog was better, or the judge didn't like the colour of your shoes, or it was too windy, or, or, or... There is no clear way to evaluate an Outcome Goal, and the only advice to move forward is "better luck next time."

Future Goals should build upon goals already achieved. Now that you have mastered that perfect stack and can repeat the performance consistently, we can build on that goal, by saying we want the dog to do stack perfectly at the end of the down and back, *and* while the judge is making his final decisions. Next, add in a rock solid stand for the examination, as that ties in with the stack you've already attained. Before you know it, you and your dog will have mastered the entire ring procedure, and you can bet you'll be proud of what you and your dog

have accomplished!

As you achieve your goals, your confidence improves, which improves your ring presence. You are more relaxed, because you have had success in the past, and know that you can achieve the goals you have set for yourself. In turn, your dog is more relaxed, as we know every emotion we feel in the ring travels right down the lead to our dog. You paint a beautiful picture when you are in the ring together, working as a team, and delivering a wonderful performance. And it's very hard for a judge to deny a dog who "asks for the win." And before you know it, you are being rewarded with those Majors! When you win them, enjoy it, but enjoy it because you and your dog earned it together, and you had a great time together along the way.

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