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DENISE FENZI



Competition Dog Sports Etiquette

by Denise Fenzi | Sep 21, 2015 | Musings | 24 comments

Sometimes novice exhibitors aren't sure what is expected in terms of etiquette at competition dog events and indeed, there are a few unwritten courtesies that make it much easier to manage a lot of dogs in a small space. This blog will address the topic of "dog show etiquette."

It is absolutely possible that your dog loves everyone, doesn't notice being stared at, and has no objections to being approached by rambunctious dogs. It is also possible that your dog does even better in the ring when there is a dog thrashing his toy next to the entrance, but for others, any of the above scenarios can literally ruin their chances of qualifying.

It's helpful if we manage our dogs and our behavior so that everyone can have the best possible chances of success. We all make mistakes, so if you realize that you were playing too close to a ring and now the dog in the ring is staring at you...hey, it

happens. Apologize to the owner when the time is right, and be a little more mindful next time.

While some of you might consider this a training issue, keep in mind that a person at the dog show may already be quite nervous, so why make it harder for them than it needs to be?

Yes, dogs should be trained to tolerate *normal* levels of distraction, but good manners and basic sportsmanship suggests that it's not your place to create them.

It's not that there are things you *cannot* do, it's just that we're all in this together, so take a moment to be aware that other people may have different needs than you. Try and take their perspective.

I have owned friendly dogs, unfriendly dogs, crate guarders, worriers, rambunctious dogs, etc, and all of them took forms of management. I do not 'relax" at the dog show when my dogs are out; I pay attention, manage behavior as required and put them away when I need a rest. I am responsible for my dog's well being, both physical and mental, and I am also responsible for not causing harm to you or your dog's physical or mental well being.

As you read through the rest of this article, one thing should begin to stand out for you....*you must pay attention*. Always. If your dog is out of his crate, then pay attention to what he is doing and where he is looking. That's your number one responsibility when you are in public with your dog. So if you

take nothing else from this blog, hold onto that one thought. Pay attention.

1. Keep your dog under control at all times.

Your dog should not be staring at other dogs or lunging (whether friendly or threatening) anywhere at a dog show. This includes the parking lot, walking in to the building, where you set up your crate and when you move through the common spaces. That means a short leash – 4 feet is pushing it. Your dog should be walking nicely with you or held close if you don't have LLW. There is no reason why your dog should be scampering around 15 or more feet away from you on a Flexi. If you are pulling a dolly and walking three dogs all at the same time, give some thought to whether or not you are in control. If not, you'll need to make more than one trip to your car or take fewer dogs to the show.

Your dog might be social but not all dogs want to visit with your dog and most handlers do not want their dogs visiting, regardless of how friendly they might be. If you really really really want your dog to meet another dog then ask first! If I want to talk to another person and we both have our dogs, then I put my dog on a reliable down stay a few feet away so that I can approach. Most people take the hint nicely and keep their dog with them.

2. Be aware of where you are standing

When entering or leaving a ring, give as much room to the next dog as possible. The last thing the next exhibitor wants is a dog to dog interaction as they enter the ring. You should not be “on deck” until it is your turn to be there, nor should you be standing in such a way that others have to get around you when it is their turn. Move!

3. Manage your dog's crate behavior.

If your dog whines or barks in the crate, cover it! If that doesn't do the trick, then learn how to keep your dog quiet in the crate. That might mean sitting with your dog, dropping treats in the top at random intervals, or relocating your crate to a quieter (and possibly less convenient) location. Better yet, train your dog to accept periods of crating, but while you work on that, you are responsible for managing your dog's behavior.

Not only is it hard on the other exhibitors to have a dog nearby that is incessantly barking or whining, it's also quite hard on your own dog. Keep in mind that poor crate behavior is a sign of distress – if your dog is worked up and agitated at the show then it's not likely that you'll do very well in the ring. Solve the problem! It will make your own dog more successful and comfortable, and it will be much appreciated by your fellow exhibitors. A bark here and there is no big deal – it's a dog and dogs do vocalize. But non-stop whining, barking, or even occasional lunging is a problem and you are responsible for controlling it.

If your dog crate guards, cover your crate, or isolate your dog so that others aren't being lunged at every time they walk by. If space is at a premium, place your chair immediately in front of your crate and then sit there, effectively blocking your dog's view of other dogs and making guarding behavior much less likely. If that is not sufficient to do the trick, then ask yourself if you're really ready to be at the show. Maybe you should be working on this issue in training instead of focusing on the actual behaviors required in the ring.

Along those same lines, do not assume that just because your dog doesn't mind other dogs looking in his crate that this is universally the case. Most dogs do not appreciate another dog looking in their crate when they are resting. That is their home! It would be like someone looking in your house windows when you are inside! Give as much room as possible to other people's occupied crates when you and your dog walk by.

4. Consider Where and How you Play with your dog.

There is no problem with playing with your dog at a show, but be aware of the intensity of your play when you are near the rings.

That doesn't mean you need to tiptoe and whisper, but take a moment to look around and see where you are before you start throwing food or playing a crazy game of tug in a small space.

Agility trials are more relaxed, but even there you should restrict the intensity of your play where the dog in the ring can see you.

Not only is this more fair for the person in the ring, it also

prevents your dog from becoming a target – don't ask for trouble! Check with your instructor to get a sense of what is reasonable and what will be considered obnoxious by your fellow competitors.

5. Is this a good time to Chat?

Some times are better to talk to people than others, so give some thought to when you approach someone to start up a conversation. Remember, the other exhibitors may be nervous or very focused on their dog at a given moment. If you wait until they are relaxed and not interacting with their dog, and definitely not when they are about to enter or leave a ring, you'll find that most people are very happy to chat.

6. Handling Other People's Ignorance

Realistically, you are going to encounter people who aren't paying close attention, and as a result their behavior will cause problems for others. Here are some phrases that might be helpful:

"Your dog seems really agitated in the crate. Have you considered moving a bit further away from the other dogs to help him calm down? I'm also concerned that he appears to be upsetting some of the dogs that are going in the ring"

"My dog doesn't like other dogs looking at him in his crate. Could you tighten up your leash a bit? Thanks; I really appreciate that"

“I need to get by you but your dog is on a long leash and my dog won't be comfortable if they interact. Thank you.”

You get the idea. Tell the person what the problem is, offer gentle advice if they appear receptive, and be kind and appreciative if they make appropriate changes.

Do not EVER discipline or feed someone else's dog without explicit permission, no matter how obnoxious their dog's behavior is. Talk to the trial secretary if you have a serious complaint, or speak with the exhibitor in a gentle fashion. Screaming at them may make you feel better but it sure won't do anything to help the reputation of our sport. And anyway, it's mean and it makes you look ugly. Let's aim a little higher.

New competitors aren't bad, stupid or deserving of humiliation; they simply don't know better yet. We all did things when we were first starting out – we had to learn. Help them! And if you are an instructor, take a few moments with your new exhibitor and review these basic rules. Better yet, practice and model them in your classes so that they become second nature. We'll all benefit and with time, maybe we can see more growth in our dog sports.

And on another note, instruction will begin for the October 1st term at Fenzi Dog Sports Academy in a couple of days! Get registered now; we are offering 27 classes in just about every topic under the sun. I'm teaching two very popular foundation courses, “Precision Heeling” and “Relationship Building Through

Play.” We love to see new faces, so feel free to take a class and then join our very supportive Facebook group for Alumni of the academy! Send me a note through Facebook if you need some help choosing the right course for your situation.



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24 Comments



Deb Hyde on September 29, 2015 at 7:42 am

Perfect!



RL on September 29, 2015 at 8:56 am

Thanks for this Denise. I see too many socially aggressive dogs.

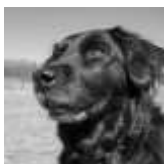




Robyn McNutt on September 29, 2015 at 12:14 pm

This is great information!! Thanks for reminding all of us how to behave at a dog show!

Reply



Michelle on September 29, 2015 at 12:33 pm

Love this. I wish everyone listened to this. We had two dogs charge my dog at one agility trial and then they charged the ring when we were out there. She was nervous about them after they charged her (mostly because she had been recently attacked elsewhere). And when she came out of a tunnel and they were right there at the end of their flexi leashes and charged forward she just shut down. I had to end her run and take her out because she wouldn't do anything else.

Reply



ejhaskins on May 2, 2016 at 8:05 pm

Would it be a good idea for Clubs to ban 'flexi-leashes' at trials?

Reply



Jenny H on September 29, 2015 at 3:38 pm

I would like to add here, IF the Judge asks you to leave the ring do NOT start an argument with him/her! Especially so when lining up for the groups exercises

☹️ It makes the other triallers angry and their dogs nervous ☹️

Reply



Suzy on September 29, 2015 at 4:00 pm

What a fabulous article! Thank you 😊

Reply



Judy Cummings on September 29, 2015 at 4:59 pm

Amen! I remember being in the Novice ring for Groups many years ago when a “big hat trainer” started playing a vigorous game of tug with her dog not more than 10 feet behind our dogs. This caused several in the group to break position to turn and watch, including mine. Needless to say, that was an NQ I’d like to have back!

Reply



Laura on October 1, 2015 at 10:43 am

We do USDAA and AKC agility trials. I’ve seen all kinds of nice people and really rude people. My big black dog barks alot, even though he’s covered up. He had gotten better at one point, until a fellow competitor and “trainer” decided to “help” by banging on his crate when he barked, I was almost the one who lost it, not my dog. Since then, we make a point of crating FAR away from everyone. What gets me are the folks

who stand clustered together or in chairs blocking both ring entrances and exits, like this article says, unless you're running next, be polite and move. There are trials we just don't enter when you're crating on top of each other and it's really cramped, it's just not worth the stress and aggravation for me or my dogs.



Barbara Fairbanks on October 1, 2015 at 3:05 pm

I totally agree! I would love to print this out and hand out to certain people, even in our classes! The vigorous tug playing was going on right near us when we were practicing on a rally course at class. My dog can be reactive, and our trainer knows it. I have bent over backwards to help him with this behavior with special classes, and being very attentive to his body language, and a careful control of his environment. When I said I was uncomfortable with the 'close quarters', and was nervous that my dog could react, how did this trainer that I previously respected respond? "Well, that's what you're going to be exposed to at a real trial, so he has to get used to it!" I decided that I would probably not renew after our paid tuition had ended. That's a shame because the worst we can do is 'isolate', and he does need exposure to a 'doggy environment', but not like this! Coincidentally, the offending 'space invader' hasn't been there lately, so maybe the issue has resolved on its own. If this repeats, I will whip out my copy of Denise's text on trial etiquette, and hand one to the

offending party AND the class trainer. Don't suppose I'll be very popular after that!

Reply

Sara on October 1, 2015 at 8:06 pm

These are great reminders. Honestly, some of the biggest violators are not Novice handlers. My experience has been that some very seasoned individuals are the most discourteous.

Reply

Barbara Fairbanks on October 2, 2015 at 9:22 pm

I've had several different Rally obd. Trainers Only one has ever touched upon show etiquette! It s/b a "required" subject. I've been fortunate enough that I often have some really great training buddies, as well as our primary trainer, who will run interference for us at the ring, as they know my dog can be reactive. The one time no one was there to support was a novice leg we were excused from (by judge) on the 3rd exercise, as my dog lunged/growled at a big white dog, standing at the ring entrance staring at my dog. They were up after us, and we had to squeeze past them to enter. That made me very nervous, and that nervousness traveled right down the leash! We were at least 12 ft away from that dog at the entrance, but facing him after executing a 180 turn, and my dog refused to

come front fm. heel because he would have had his back to that dog, still intently staring! My dog did a half-way "front", and sat @right angle to my left. I figured that was best I was going to get from him, and sent him around on a right finish. When he came around into heel position he built speed and just kept on going toward that big white dog at the entrance! Luckily, this WAS novice, and he was leashed, but because he rebounded back after hitting the end of his leash (i.e., a pretty strong leash correction!), we were asked to leave the ring. So, my dog appeared to be the "bad guy", but honestly I felt we'd been set up. These days I would have avoided the situation and forfeited our entry, rather than take a chance against such odds. Live and learn, I guess.

[Reply](#)

Lori on October 3, 2015 at 1:09 am

Sadly, I think that we need to consider the possibility that some of these behaviors as practiced by non-novices are intentional.

[Reply](#)

Jenny H on October 3, 2015 at 4:11 pm

And sadly, Lori, I think you might be right. It has not occurred to me in the dog obedience/agility world, but I have seen it

blatantly happening in other sports ☐

Although I had always thought of this behaviour as selfish and unthoughtful at dog trials.

Because I have seen competitors losing out because of well-meaning friends hanging out/commenting at the ring boundaries.

Reply

Heather on October 8, 2015 at 7:38 am

It does seem like it.

Reply

KJ on October 4, 2015 at 9:44 pm

I remember being that Novice handler and honestly not knowing better. It would be great if a version of this blog was included in all of the show premiums and passed out at the Novice training classes. Thanks Denise!

Reply

lisa cadieux on October 16, 2015 at 4:11 pm

I am HUGELY appreciative of clubs that provide a protected area for dogs "on deck". I work very hard to ensure my reactive dog is relaxed and focused at a trial, and it can all go out the window from one sniff from a dog just as he's waiting to enter the ring....

Reply

Rob Bardenett on May 2, 2016 at 4:08 pm

This article was recently re-printed on the USDAA website and I not only appreciated the advice that was given but also the spirit in which it was given. Hopefully my comment will be received in the spirit that it's given. I am one of those guys with "nice" dogs. They aren't reactive and I credit that with not only how they were socialized but they all come from the same line which produces dogs with outstanding temperaments. I consider myself to be very fortunate but I also put temperament at the top of things I look for. My one disagreement with the great advice in this article is that I have to be vigilant about making sure my dog doesn't look at another reactive dog. I can't tell you how often we will be standing out of the way (at least 15') And one of mine will be sitting or laying at my feet wagging their tail with a ball in their mouth and one of the reactive dogs will walk by, go off, and I'm the one who gets yelled at. There is something wrong with this picture. I think most people would love to have dogs with my dog's temperament along with their outstanding careers as agility dogs.

I don't get upset if their dog lunges, we just stay calm and if we have to move we move. All I'm asking is that if you have the reactive dog, realize it's not us that's the problem.

Thank you!



ejhaskins on May 2, 2016 at 8:00 pm



Rob Bardenett, it does depend though of HOW your dogs “look” at other dogs. I have had reactive dogs (mostly in the Bad Old Days of check-chain training). Believe me we owners of ‘reactive dogs’ do our best to avoid trouble. But everything goes haywire when a Border Collie (or Sheltie or Rottie or . . .) decides to give the reactive dog the Evil Eye. Staring another dog in the eyes is very rude in dog language 😞

It is easy enough to recognise when your dog is giving a hard stare to another and to intervene to break the eye contact. It is eye contact that is the problem not the vicinity.

I am always alert when another dog approaches mine and if the dog stares at my dog I will turn and move away. If this is not possible I will cue my dog to look at me or otherwise put my hand over is/her eyes.

On the other and I feel pretty uncomfortable too when a stranger stares at me, so I don’t ‘blame’ my dogs for reacting to a stare.

Reply

Rob Bardenett on May 7, 2016 at 6:08 pm

EJ, Sorry for the late response. I am very aware of the difference between a dog just “looking” vs. “staring” because I’ve had to walk the other way when I see a dog with that menacing look. Thankfully my dogs don’t react adversely to that stare; most of the time they take no notice. My beef is

with the dogs that have eyes in the back of their head and their people complaining when my or other dogs just look as they walk by. We don't exist in a vacuum at these trials and some dogs can't deal with even the most reasonable of looks. I realize that dogs sense things differently and often more acutely. Many of my friends have had to deal with their dogs being reactive some more successfully than others so I understand and am sympathetic to those that do have to deal with this problem. Just too many times do I see people with a problem place the blame (or responsibility) on others rather than deal with it or just admit that their dog will be happier if they aren't in a situation that brings out this reaction. I make it a point to keep my guys out of any situation that places needless stress on them and if that included agility trials then I wouldn't do agility with them. Rob

[Reply](#)

dlvassar on February 8, 2017 at 7:25 am

Hi, I'm the web admin for <http://www.triunecanine.com>. May we post this article on our website? We would, of course, give you credit and link back to your site. Thank you.

[Reply](#)

dfenzi on February 8, 2017 at 7:39 am

sure

Reply

dlvassar on February 8, 2017 at 12:30 pm

Thank you!

Reply

MooDog on May 13, 2017 at 11:39 am

Thank you so much for this! After being lambasted by someone who invited me to a sporting event, I wanted to understand what was expected before getting an earful from anyone else. In spite of my bad experience, I'm going to give it another try or two. No one judge me for hiding with my dog, inside his crate from the humans, lol!

Reply

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Here is another one-minute compilation of skills - I call these "Drills" because I probably did each of them a few times before moving on, they are super quick and fluid, and I am likely to reinforce close to every effort. This was pulled from a session of about eight...

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