

Your Labrador in the Show Ring

You could show that dog! Look at him; the head, the coat, the tail. He even smiles.

Who Shows Their Dog?

Well, you could. A dog show is a competition to find the best examples of the breed in appearance, structure and movement. Show dogs are not remarkable animals, standing out from the ordinary, with every feature just a little more than average. At least they shouldn't be. Champions look like Labradors, move like Labradors and in all ways help to preserve the typical Labrador type. Plain with style, outstanding within the standard, if all this ordinariness sounds like your dog perhaps he could become a champion.

First a checklist:-

- you have a pure bred Labrador
 - it is healthy
 - it is intact (very few shows have classes for desexed dogs)
 - it is registered in your name; and
 - you are a member of the Victorian Canine Association (VCA);
- then you both qualify.

Enter Here

The VCA can provide entry forms and its magazine advertises shows you can enter. The Labrador Club also conducts shows and competitions (perfect for beginners). Complete the entry form using block letters. Check classes for which your dog is eligible. Accurately copy the name of the dog, its dam and its sire from the registration certificate, along with dates of birth and titles. Include your own details and membership number. Mail your entry to the club secretary as early as possible with the correct entry fee and, if required, a stamped, self-addressed envelope for return of exhibit number. Mark your diary.

Training

It does not take too long to train for the show ring. If your dog is reasonably well behaved on a lead, walks and trots at your side and can stand still for a little while, that will do for a beginner. Ask someone more experienced for help and watch others handling their dogs. Become polished but remember it is the dog that is on show.

Further training should produce a dog that:

- free stands in a show stance for a few minutes, looking happy and attentive
- allows you to move its feet around if you need to (try to resist the urge)
- calmly allows the judge to check front teeth and handle the head, body and tail
- moves with you around the ring with head up and tail out on a loose lead.

These can be achieved with rewards (baiting) and practice. Gain your dog's attention and avoid negative training or over correcting. If your dog is not happy it is very difficult to win.

As you build experience there are finer points to handling. One is having the dog run in step with you, taking two steps to your one so you can adjust its pace and reach. Another is having the dog following your left hand as you run, controlling its position and head height. Finally, teach the dog to move into the show stance on command, happy and wagging his tail. Not all handlers use all of these techniques and you must decide what is elegant and achievable for your dog.

The Show Stance

A show stance is fundamental to showing. Examples can be seen in photos in books and show magazines. The stance should be natural with head high and level, neck extended a little, back straight and level and tail out a little (but not higher than the back). The front legs should be parallel so the feet are about a hand width apart and seen from the side the legs are vertical. The hind legs are a little wider apart and seen from the side the hocks (lower third of hind legs) should be vertical. Too much distance between the front and hind legs will make the dog uncomfortable and look stretched out.

Free standing is the most common stance for Labradors. That is, handler and dog standing face to face, about half a metre apart. The loose lead should be pushed back over the dog's shoulders or, if it is fine enough, up close around the chin. The handler holds the end of the lead against his or her chest while attracting the dog's attention with a look, a toy or bait (food). Do not use anything that distracts other competitors. Stepping into the dog causes it to move back or, with practice, move one of its feet back. Leading the dog forward can adjust the whole stance. Leave yourself plenty of room as your dog may need to step a few paces forward to be in a stance you are happy with. As a last resort, adjust one of its feet by hand but with practice this can all be done without touching the dog.

The First Show

The training should have filled in a bit of time until the day of the show. It should also have given you enough confidence to pin on an exhibit number and walk your dog into the ring. If you are that confident your dog must be worth looking at.

You will be dressed appropriately for the type of show. Do not wear a suit to a member's competition and do not wear your yard clothes to the Royal. Most of all, remember you have to run, so dress comfortably and wear shoes that allow you to move evenly, silently and will not slip.

The show schedule mentioned the venue when the show starts. Allow plenty of time to get there, find "Ring 3" and make you and the dog comfortable. You should have water, a bowl, perhaps dog food, a brush. For comfort, bring a chair and something for the dog to sit on, as well as some means of chaining him to one place.

Two things you must have are your exhibit number (that the show secretary sent you) and a show lead. Take advice on the best show lead for your dog. You must maintain control but ideally the lead should blend into the picture. Puppies often begin on a 1cm wide rib and lead with a single ring at the end. When placed around the dog's neck there may be 80 or 90cm free lead.

Walk the dog around both to empty him out and to get use to the surroundings, then relax. Check your exhibit number. Listen to the numbers the steward calls out and watch the activity in the ring.

Picking Winners

In each breed, the dogs are shown first then the bitches, each separated into their age classes. The classes for dogs are Baby Puppy Dog, Minor Puppy Dog, Puppy Dog, Junior Dog, Intermediate Dog, Australian Bred Dog, and Open Dog. The winners of those classes, except Baby Puppy Dog, compete together for the Dog Challenge (best dog of breed). The bitches are shown in equivalent age classes then compete for the Bitch Challenge (best bitch of breed). Challenge Dog and Challenge Bitch compete together for Best of Breed. Various runoffs decide the best Puppy of breed, best Junior of breed etc.

Most importantly, both Challenge winners earn points towards the title Australian Champion. The Best of Breed gets to compete for Best in Group 3 (Best in Group winners compete for Best in Show). That is the main competition.

During the procedure a secondary competition follows the age classes. For example, Best Junior dog and bitch compete for Best Junior of Breed. All Juniors of Breeds in Group 3 compete for Junior in Group and so on through to Junior in Show. If you win anything, even 1st place in a class of one, ask if you are required for runoffs or Group Specials.

It is a logical process but best explained in person rather than on paper.

Inside Ring 3

Ring 3 is for gundogs, which includes Labradors. At normal championship shows dogs are called in one breed after another in alphabetical order. Very soon after Irish Setters finish the steward will call "Labradors get ready."

Your dog's class will be called and when you hear your number, lead your dog into the ring and line up with any others in your class. Follow the instructions of the steward and the judge.

Judges often proceed in the following steps:

- run the whole class around the ring together stopping where the judge directs
- call the first dog out for individual judging, "relax the rest"
- hand checking the bite, structure, coat and other features
- "Triangle please" directing the handler to move the dog directly away from the judge, across to the left to show movement from the side, and directly back to the judge stopping a few feet away.
- direct the handler to run the dog around the ring and join the back of the line
- follow the same steps for each of the rest of the class
- again run the class around the ring together and point to winner, second place then the third place
- place getters move their dogs in front of the place numbers with others behind while the steward records the results

- the class leaves the ring

Answer only the judge's questions (usually how old is the dog) and don't apologise for inexperience. The judge is already making allowances and does not need to be told. If the dog misbehaves calm down, slow down and use it as a training exercise. Never just give up. Never believe you just cannot do it.

Your Handling Style

Everyone handles a little differently and makes minor changes for each dog they handle. Take advice from others about improving the stance and movement of your dog,

While moving their dogs around the ring, beginners often take steps that are far too short. Watch the best movers and note the length of the handlers stride. Note how evenly they run with no hint of jogging up and down. The faster movers use the entire ring, keeping wide on the corners, while the slower movers cut the corners. Adjust your path to keep the best stride for your dog allowing plenty of space between you and the dog in front. You would not want the dog behind to crowd you.

Every time you set off around the ring check the lead. It should be up as high as possible on the neck. Lift the loop of the lead briefly so it does not cause the hair stick up. Do the same under the chin to ensure the lead is not gathering a roll of skin into a double chin. Always run with the lead in your left hand only, never both hands.

Sportsmanship

Winning, losing or just watching, your enjoyment and respect will increase if you remain above any criticism of other people, their dogs or the judge. It is not part of the sport and you can help keep it that way. Ignore those who have not learnt this lesson yet and focus on what you have to do to become a winner.

Congratulations -- you are on your way!