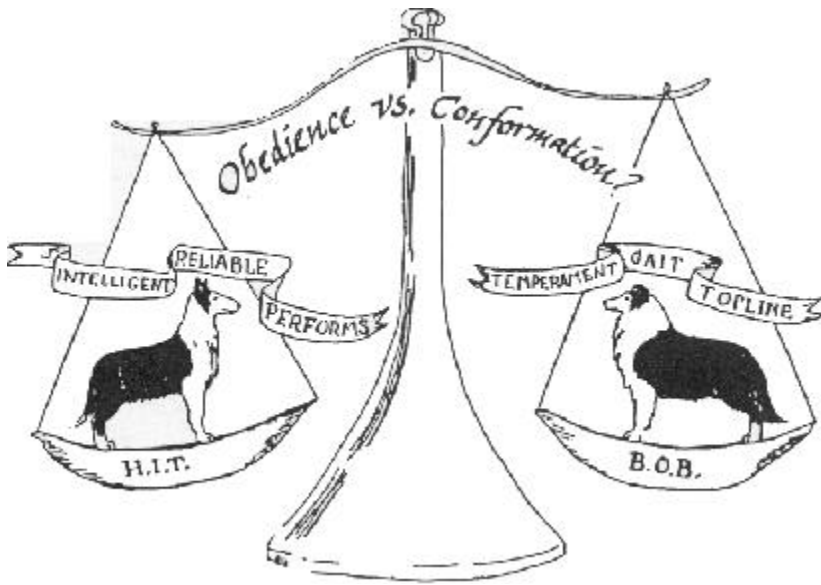


Obedience Is...Rivalry With Conformation



by
Pam Green

Despite having a common interest in showing purebred dogs, there seems to be a general consensus that obedience people and conformation people are engaged in a rivalry. It is not an obvious battle or argument. It is more subtle like Republicans and Democrats or upper class or middle class. If you find this difficult to believe, think about the location of the obedience rings versus the conformation rings at various shows you have attended. Compare trophies offered for conformation and obedience. How about topics at kennel club meetings? Obedience people are not envied, but rather looked down upon. Why is that? Some of the reasons that I have heard expressed are that obedience people have inferior dogs, they have tunnel vision when breeding their dogs, they do not groom or bathe their dogs, and they dress tacky. Even though we have survived the 60's where people were discriminated against for having long hair, dressing differently, and listening to rock and roll music, some things just do not change. Let's take a look at these reasons to see if any are valid.

◆ INFERIOR DOGS?

For argument's sake, let's say obedience people do have inferior dogs (in the conformation sense).

Who's fault is it that they do have inferior dogs? The breeders! I have met so many people who ventured into obedience with their first purebred dog because it did not turn out to be show quality. "At least you can do obedience with him..." is a very familiar phrase that breeders come back with when the dog has hip dysplasia, poor head, poor topline, poor coat,

bad bite, bad eyes, etc. That obedience dog, with all his faults, is just as much a walking advertisement for the breeder as those in the breed ring. Ironically, many of these breeders do not support obedience with their dogs!

Do you know that some breeders will not sell a good show or breeding prospect to an obedience home? The reasons range from "it will break his spirit" to "he'll sit in the breed ring." or "I'm concerned if you have a conflict at a show that you may choose obedience over conformation." Silly, huh? Especially the part about sitting in the breed ring. Do conformation people think their dogs will go through life standing simply because they have never been taught to sit? It is a vicious circle. The obedience people need a sound dog perhaps even more than the prospective buyer who "might" be interested in showing. I know the breeders who advertise, "sound, good temperament" and then turn down an obedience home. Good temperament is important in training for obedience competition, but you often hear a breeder say, "This puppy's temperament is not right for the breed ring so I'll sell him to a pet home or an obedience home." That temperament that is "not right" could be either shy or aggressive. I have also heard breeders state to the obedience owner, "This puppy's temperament is not right for the breed ring so breed her and keep a nice puppy out of her." Several obedience people I know refer far more people to their breeders than those who show in conformation. In any case, simply because many obedience dogs are not up to conformation show quality or breeding quality certainly does not justify looking down on people.

◆ TUNNEL VISION

Tunnel vision when breeding a dog occurs

in almost any facet of dogs - not just obedience. A certain amount of this tunnel vision may only be that the obedience person is uninformed. Who is in the best position to educate and inform them? The breeders! I have seen some amusing advertisements in national magazines for pups out of dogs shown only in obedience. I am sure not all of the "obedience" people who are breeders were turned down by conformation breeders, but perhaps only "turned off." There are certainly many aspects of a dog to consider before breeding than just "brains" and "trainability." I have heard comments about breeding from all areas - field, racing, breed ring, obedience, and protection. "Fifi is not show quality, but she has such a nice pedigree, maybe I will get a nice puppy out of her." "Rambo is such a good watch dog, and so many people want his pups. They don't care that he has hip dysplasia." We have all heard comments like these from people other than those in obedience, so tunnel vision can not be blamed only on obedience people.

Some breedings take place in any event - not to make money, but often because it is too hard to be objective about a dog's faults when you love it. Being uninformed about problems in dogs such as hip dysplasia, PRA, or conformational faults causes the "tunnel vision" cycle to perpetuate. The uneducated breeder who sells a pup obviously does not instill ethics or education in the new puppy owner. Without help from the informed breeder, not only does the new puppy owner suffer by not furthering their knowledge, but ultimately the breed suffers. Since the example was not set, why should they help a puppy buyer when they were never helped? Breeders should strive for education and improvement especially where pups are sold to "pet" homes where they do not "plan" on breeding, but wind up doing so for whatever reason, even if it is an accident.

Possibly more consideration should be given to selling "pet" puppies on spay or neuter contracts or at the very least on co-ownership's until the quality is determined. Unfortunately, the new puppy buyer who is so impressed with his beautiful pet quality puppy, thinks that the reason you want to spay or neuter the puppy is because you see them as "rival" breeders and financial competition. Right there is a perfect time to start educating the new puppy owner.

Kennel Clubs, too, can strive to educate the public as well as their own membership by making new dog owners aware of hereditary problems in dogs and conformation faults. Unfortunately, Kennel Clubs featuring educational programs do not let the novices know about the programs and frequency. They won't adver-

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tise since the policy to attend meetings may be by invitation only. If information is presented properly to a novice, they find their way on the right path and the poor breeding may not take place. Additionally, in a properly planned breeding more thought may go into selecting a stud and bitches may be screened conscientiously before breeding. All this concern goes toward producing better and more sound dogs. Does your kennel club have a good educational program?

◆ UNCLEAN DOGS

It has been said that too many obedience people do not even groom their dogs for shows let alone bathe them. This area has been "cleaned up" more recently and obedience handlers should receive "atta boys" and "atta girls" for that effort. If for no other reason than to promote AKC exhibition, all dogs should be clean for their presentation to the judge. I am sure that judges in both obedience and conformation appreciate examining a clean dog. What can be the reason for exhibitors not bathing their dog the day before the show(s)? Are they afraid the dog will be worn out! Unlikely. Maybe their dog does not behave? Amusing thought. Or, maybe the exhibitor is just plain lazy? It is hard to imagine that someone who spends hours, days, weeks, months, and even years training a dog for competition would not take less than an hour to bathe a dog.

◆ TACKY DRESSED HANDLERS!

I have often heard the comment, "Obedience people dress so tacky at dog shows!"

I can agree with this statement. I have seen countless dogs receive High in Trials with their handlers smiling proudly about the day's achievement dressed in faded blue jeans. Remember, the outstanding obedience dog taking High in Trial is often awarded between the conformation group judging and not just obedience people are present. That one person represents all the obedience entries for that given day, much like Best of Breed represents the breed entry. Those people are obviously proud as they accept the trophy, yet not proud enough to have worn something worthy of the occasion.

Do not tell me. "But they didn't know they were going to win!" True, but neither do a large percentage of the conformation people (let's not talk politics and pre-show rumors at this point!). I am not of the opinion that it is necessary that the ladies wear a dress or a

skirt and top when exhibiting in obedience. I do feel that a pant suit or nice slacks with a coordinated top would be attractive. New Levis with a nice shirt would even be acceptable. Old training quality clothes are a disgrace to the hard work and effort that went into the performance.

The next excuse I would expect to hear would be, "But obedience people are at dog shows all day - not like the conformation people who know a specific time that they show." While it is true that conformation people can show and leave (unless they take the breed or group). There are facilities on the show grounds where a person can change into their "ring clothes" and change back again until the class awards. Could it be that it is only laziness that makes the obedience people toss on their casual clothes and trot off to the dog show?

Conformation people on the average exhibit in nice clothes. Yes, I have seen the women in "quack dresses" (those that barely cover their "quack") that can be said to be "tacky." However, the general trend is for women to wear skirts and blouses or dresses and the men to wear suits. Let's face it, the conformation people look good. A very good friend of mine, who is an obedience judge now, finished a Doberman stomping around the ring in cowboy boots, but he was not proud of that foot attire - he was forced to show his own dog because his handler had a conflict. Maybe he was not a Boy Scout ("always be prepared..." get it).

In the southwest we seem to be plagued with many obedience exhibitors wearing shorts, tank tops, midriff blouses (no bras), thongs. no underwear (both sexes have been guilty on that one!). And yes, let's not forget the baseball caps. Give me a break! This is a show! The public attends these functions. Yes, I know, it is a DOG show and the DOG is being judged, not the handler. Although, the handler can lose points in the obedience ring for his four-legged friend's performance just like the conformation handler can lose by not moving his dog properly or by improperly stacking his dog. We should be proud enough to wear something more appropriate. With all the paraphernalia we haul to dog shows, what is wrong with adding a nice change of show clothes?

Obedience people are a very important part of the dog show scene and should be proud of what they do. Considerable work for both dog and handler goes into the sport of obedience just to earn a qualifying score,

let alone score high and place.

Some obedience exhibitors are so proud of their dog that when the dog fails, the handler blames himself instead of the dog because it was probably something he did (or did not do) in training. This redeeming quality is may frequently blame everything and everybody except himself when the dog does not win. I have even heard it said that quite unlike the conformation exhibitor, conformation people are jealous of obedience people and that one reason they do not show or train in obedience is because they know where the fault lies when the performance is less than desirable and they find it difficult to face that fact.

With all its wonder and excitement, it is the obedience ring that often attracts the general public at the dog shows. The exhibitors are representing the sport of obedience, good sportsmanship, conscientious dog ownership through training, as well as the breed they are exhibiting. Whether we are in obedience or conformation, we all should do our dogs proud - by breeding them conscientiously, bathing and grooming them, and showing them to their best by looking our best too!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Pam Green has been involved with Alaskan Malamutes for fifteen years, and Labrador Retrievers for eight years. She has been teaching obedience classes for fifteen years, including Open and Utility for the past ten years. She was the founder of the Southern Arizona Husky Club in Tucson for those owning Alaskan Malamutes, Samoyeds, or Siberian Huskies or interested in carting. Currently, she is the Training Director for Cactus Canine Center, Inc., a non-profit organization that sponsors obedience classes for the public at Reid Park in Tucson. Pam invites questions to her articles or suggestions for future articles.