

Spotlight on Juniors By Kylie Jo Hirschy © 2003

If you watched Westminster 2003, you surely saw Clint Livingston winning in the group ring. Did you know Clint was the first ever to earn an all-breed Best Junior Handler award while showing a Field Spaniel (CH Jeran's Daydream Believer)? Along the way, he also campaigned that same dog to the top spot in the breed several years in a row. Other former top juniors currently show top Field Spaniels including Rachal McKee Sager, Danielle Brewer and Howard Huber III. The top junior with a Field Spaniel for 2002, Sara Johns, has successfully shown her competition dog, CH Kellisto Del Prado OA, to his Championship, and group placements as well as agility titles.

Junior Showmanship is "close to my heart" as I showed extensively in that area when I was a teenager. Showing a Golden Retriever that I finished myself (CH Amberac's U Can't Tucker Him Out) and several Field Spaniels (CH OTCH Chevy, CH Demo, and CH Race), I earned national rankings through competition and defeating other juniors that included #1 Junior Handler with a Sporting Breed, #4 All Breed and, the highlight, #1 Junior Handler with a Golden Retriever along with #1 Junior Handler with a Field Spaniel. I am very grateful for the relationships forged in competition with other excellent juniors, such as friend Jessy Sutton, who showed my former juniors dog, "Race", at the 2002 specialty at my request. These relationships, learning how to be a good winner and more importantly, a gracious loser, are really a large part of what juniors is all about. Having seen both sides now, as a competitor and as a judge, I would like to share with you a perception from the "middle of the ring" that may help you achieve more success as you pursue junior showmanship with your Field Spaniel.

One of the first things juniors judges notice is how the dog comes into the ring with the handler: a dog set up efficiently, confidently is clearly show-cased, and an eye-catcher. After judging several juniors assignments, I cannot stress enough that the first viewing of the dog/handler team is the most important. As the junior sets up the dog, I look for efficiency and confidence in creating the proper picture of the dog/handler team. As a rule of thumb, juniors should be able to set up their dog in 5 seconds. When showing in Junior Showmanship, I used to say to myself, "1,2,3, and 4, head-tail" where the count was placing the feet, then positioning of the head and the tail. Paying over much attention to a fault area in an attempt to stack the dog out a fault and so forth only serves to draw attention to it. A junior should know the faults of their dog and work with their dog enough so that the dog is trained to be easily handled for hand stacking so that little time is required to work around a fault. Mentors in both showing juniors and judging juniors have taught me that watching how juniors sets up their dog is an important cue to the overall skills of the handler.

In judging juniors, it is also important to look for the handler/dog relationship. There is a difference that can be observed that shows how well the junior and dog work as a team; this can only come when there is a genuine and affectionate relationship between the junior and the dog. Be sure to take time to play with your juniors dog and develop a relationship. It will shine through in the ring.

How well the handler and dog gait together is another piece of the picture. Even though it may seem simple, it takes some work to determine the best way to gait any particular dog. Take it from me: as a beginner in the Junior Showmanship ring, quite simply, I ran “funny” and bounced my arm all over the place or, worse, held it with no movement at all! An exercise my juniors mentors had me do repeatedly helped me learn to gait a dog properly. I was instructed to gait while holding a lead with a weight on the end of it, but without a dog! Only when I was comfortable gaiting, holding a lead with a weight but with no dog, and changing my own pace smoothly while allowing my hand and arm to move gently to avoid any swing of the weight, was it time to bring my dog into the exercise. It is very important to move smoothly with the dog so that your movements are not a distraction behind the dog. Your arm should not string the dog up in the air, but a nice loose lead does not mean the lead is draping in a swoop beneath the dog’s chin. The ideal “loose” lead is not really loose per se; it is actually similar to holding the reins of a dressage horse. The lead may look taut to those outside the ring who are unaware of the proper use of the lead, but it is imperative that it be as straight line from hand to dog, very much in the manner in which the reins of a horse are held by top competitive riders, so that instant communication between the dog and handler is possible. This is the purpose for learning to properly hold a lead by using a weight on the end of it. You must learn to move your arm and hand gently to avoid swing of the weight (which represents too much pressure and a tight lead on the dog). Watch a great junior showing and you will see how the hand and arm move almost imperceptibly to maintain a nice straight line of communication between handler and dog.

It is also important to listen to instructions. In judging a junior showmanship class, most judges, including myself, give specific instructions. When given specific instruction, the junior should comply efficiently and correctly. To do otherwise, simply shows that the junior is not listening well to instructions.

Once a junior has learned how to gait, it is time to practice individual patterns. The “L”, the “T”, the “Down & Back” are some of the more commonly seen. Whatever the pattern might be, pay attention to keeping a straight line. Before showing in Junior Showmanship, I showed in Obedience. I learned at an early age to pick a focal point with my eyes to maintain a straight line. Just as with a dog, where the eyes go, the body goes. The top juniors do not drift all over the ring in gaiting their dog; they are able to focus and maintain a line, while at the same time being attentive to the dog and the judge. Learn to get a focal point and gait your dog toward that point. With practice, it becomes automatic and you no longer need to think about it.

Free baiting isn’t for everybody, but it can truly make the difference in how a junior places in a class. In judging juniors, a final observation is often to ask the juniors to gait the dogs around, individually, and then free bait them in the center of the ring. It is a very helpful keen competition to sorting out the class, so be prepared for it! (and if you Best in Show at Westminster 2003, you would have seen this seem instruction given to the handlers)!

Finally, dress for success! Remember, you want to be the one in the Best Junior Handler photo! You do not need expensive outfits; when showing in juniors I often shopped Goodwill stores for bargain outfits; if we passed one on the way to a show, I begged to stop and look around! Look for something “classy” rather than whatever the current trend might be; trendy outfits may look great on a date, but can be a distraction behind your dog. I once had a judge pointedly tell me that the fringe on the bottom of a skirt flopped all over in a way that was distracting and that this was one reason I had not done well. If the best outfit does not have pockets, these can be added quite simply. I learned how to sew in order to be able to add pockets into the seams of clothing that did not have pockets. For girls, avoid minis and maxis; slightly above the knee, knee length or slightly below the knee will work well. And by all means, avoid outfits that do not allow you to move well in them. For example, when showing a liver Field Spaniel, I often wore purple or teal; both of these colors seemed to work well behind a liver dog to clearly make the dog stand out. For your dog, learn how to groom and prepare your dog well for the ring. A well-groomed dog shows preparation, and don’t forget the teeth! While it is a personal “picky point” for me in judging, when I examine a dog and see dirty teeth – well the dog is not being show-cased to the best of the juniors ability and it reflects a level of care for the dog.

Top placements in the juniors classes generally have dogs who have juniors who work to show off a dog that they love. Create a team that can float around the ring, set up with confidence, listen to instructions, dress yourself and your dog for success, and the result is simply breath taking. I wish all juniors with a Field Spaniel “good luck” in the ring! After all, the juniors of today are the breeders, exhibitors and judges of tomorrow.

Juniors Resources:

Juniors News & Views website: <http://www.jrnewsandviews.com/>

Best Junior Handler!: A Guide to Showing Successfully in Junior Showmanship by Anne Olejniczak (Contributor), Denise Olejniczak, Laura Luther (Editor). Paperback: 166 pages; Publisher: Doral Publishing; (August 1997) ISBN: 0944875459. Available in stock from Amazon.com

This is the only Juniors book that remains readily available in print; others are available on occasion but are out-of-print and not as readily available.