



Trial Readiness

by Denise Fenzi

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Part 1: High Quality Base Behaviors Make High Quality Chains

Trial readiness is the ability to perform the required exercises or obstacles at whatever level of competition that you wish to enter. Trained well, your dog may well earn perfect scores in your backyard. While impressive, most seasoned competitors know that the picture you get in your backyard with a cookie in your hand is not necessarily the same as the picture you get in the competition ring.

So how do you go from near perfection in the backyard to equally impressive work in the competition ring? This e-book is meant to show you my process for getting trial ready. For me, it starts with teaching high quality behaviors.

My training philosophy is based in teaching a great variety of behaviors – everything from sitting straight in front to running out over a jump – and then stringing those base behaviors together into formal exercises for competition. Those strings of behaviors are called behavior chains. I always work on the required base behaviors for an exercise before worrying about a chain. As a result, I may start basic scent work on the same day that I teach a puppy to sit because these are both base behaviors and neither requires the other.

The higher quality the base behaviors, the better the chains will be. That is a fundamental truth. Poor quality base behaviors do not magically morph into high quality chains. Your dog may be able to identify the correct scent article in a pile, have a cue for “pick that up,” know how to retrieve the object to hand, be able to hold an object while sitting, and have a stay, but if the base behaviors aren’t beautiful, then the chain won’t be either. In my opinion it’s better to put your energy into developing excellent base behaviors and save the chains for the future. There is no hurry in creating chains.

How you get beautiful base behaviors is up to you and is not the focus on this book. I’m a fan of errorless learning as much as possible. That means I do a lot of work with platforms, structured shaping, and heavily controlled choices to ensure a ton of success. Soon I find that the dog only knows how to perform in one way: the one I want. No matter how you teach, consistency is bred through habit and clarity; if your dog consistently performs base behaviors correctly and understands exactly what will happen if the behavior is performed correctly (or incorrectly), then you can predict what your dog will give you when you create chains.

Depending on the class or competition you are working towards, there will be a wide variety of chains that you might want. If your interest in obedience, then the chains will be very predictable. If your sport is rally or agility, then the chains are more dependent on correct handling sequences; your dog needs to know what to do when you signal in a specific way with your voice or body. Either way, those base behaviors are the building blocks of the chain.

How much time you spend practicing entire chains vs. base behaviors should depend on your dog and how your training is proceeding overall. Once my dogs are trained, I spend relatively little time on single base behaviors unless I've identified a challenge or am working with a high maintenance base behavior like fronts or finishes.

But just because I have a series of fluent behaviors chained together into a high quality chain doesn't mean I'm ready to sign up for a trial. Instead, I need to make sure my dog can perform quality work in a variety of environments through the process of generalization.

Part 2: Generalization

The next step for trial readiness is generalization. This is the process of ensuring your dog can perform high quality work in many environments. The key to generalization is the ability to break chains down again. You may have a complicated behavior chain at home – for example, a fully finished retrieve on the flat – but you know having your dog run in the direction away from you in public is a risky proposition. So when you're at the local park, you might consider doing the retrieve without the outbound send by leaving your dog on a sit-stay and leaving the dumbbell halfway between you and your dog. This allows you to work on a necessary part of the chain, but it removes the risky part and improves your odds of success.

Some trainers wait until they have a complete exercise before they start the process of generalization, but I start it very soon after my new dog or puppy arrives. Whatever we're doing at home, we practice a MUCH easier version of that same base behavior in new places. Let's say my new dog can pivot 90 degrees left with a high degree of accuracy in my bedroom. The dog can work for five minutes total with a very high rate of reinforcement. In my driveway, my dog can do that same pivot with a high degree of accuracy if he has a pivot disc for about two minutes total, again with a high rate of reinforcement. Training in the grass in the front yard, my dog can place two front feet on a pivot disc for a minute if I feed him continuously.

This means that when I head to the park down the street, my new dog probably remembers that I exist for about three seconds out of every thirty seconds. Over five minutes of time, that means my puppy checks in with me about ten times. That's it! That's an entire training session! But next time, I'll probably get about twice as much attention. I continue training, and a week later, my dog might be able to do a full 360 degree pivot in my bedroom, 90 degrees in the driveway, 90 degrees on a disc in the grass in my yard, and so on.

The above scenario assumes a linear pattern, but you probably won't see that. Dogs go through phases of abilities which can be affected by everything from hormones to hunger to anxiety to developmental weirdness. So your job is to figure out how much dog you have on any given occasion and then select both the environment and the work accordingly. You want your dog to win. A lot! Remember, we want a super positive CER (Conditioned Emotional Response) every time your puppy realizes it's time to work.

Although I do make things easier in new places, I do not accept poorer quality work. I still have standards! I will lower the challenge level though. I will make the environment easier (working on cement instead of grass), change what I'm asking for (a 90 degree pivot rather than 360 degrees), or raise the level of reinforcement (continuous feed versus a space between treats). Choosing the right level of challenge, in the right environment, for the right quantity of reinforcement is the hardest parts of dog training. Do your best to balance out these factors and your dog's behavior will tell you if you've succeeded, or if you need to adjust your approach.

Some dogs will appear to make no progress. There are a number of reasons for this. Some dogs are still immature, while others are particularly environmentally aware. For Brito, my young dog, our first six weeks at the local dog training club was spent setting up in heel position and eating. That progressed to pivots, which has since progressed to lovely heeling for five or seven steps. He can also do an adorable miniature dumbbell retrieve, a send to platform at five feet, and three scent articles. All in public! It took about six months, but that's okay! At home he's learning plenty of new skills, and he'll knock their socks off when he's ready.

When you can take your dog to a new environment and complete the entire series of behavior chains required for your sport, are you ready to compete? Nope. Not yet. Now we need to make sure that your dog loves the competition ring.

Part 3: The Competition Ring

So far, we have looked at the process of getting trial ready by obtaining high quality behaviors and then generalizing those behaviors to new environments. Both of these factors are incredibly important if you want to have a dog who can compete and succeed with confidence in a trial setting. But there's another area to consider: inside the competition ring.

The issue of building ring confidence is one of the most neglected areas of trial preparation in almost all sports. Your dog should be conditioned to love the cues that represent a trial. Everything from what he does while waiting his turn to seeing the environmental cues that signify work should elicit a happy CER. The steward's table, ring gates, even the presence of a judge should tell your dog that it's time to work.

Thankfully, teaching this is pretty easy. It goes like this:

Set up a mini ring entrance, whatever that will look like for your sport. Walk through that entrance and have a party that lasts at least 30 seconds. Throw food, run with toys, play ball – whatever your dog thinks is a party. This is one of those times when you cannot care what the neighbors might think; it's about your dog, so let go a little and make it special. Leave the ring quietly. And repeat. Over and over and over until your dog visibly brightens and gets excited at the sight of a ring. Indeed, your dog should be trying to drag you into the ring.

Stop feeding or playing with your dog on the outside of the ring when you are working on this concept. All of the fun must take place inside the ring. When your dog shows an enthusiastic demeanor, you have effectively conditioned the correct response to the competition ring: ready to go and excited to be there! Now you can add a bit of work and control inside the ring, but never stop rewarding your dog simply for entering that space.

Once you've done this, you should have a dog that is solid on behaviors, performs well in a range of environments, and LOVES to go inside of a competition ring. Should you enter a trial? Not yet. Now we need to teach your dog how to perform correctly under adversity.

Part 4: Proofing

Proofing is teaching a dog to perform correctly even under adverse conditions. Generalization is a specific type of proofing which is often (but not always) environmentally focused; can your dog perform no matter where you are? Now we'll consider generic proofing, which covers basically any other kind of adversity you can think up.

Traditionally, proofing meant setting the dog up to fail, and then following up with a correction when he did. Over time the dog got the message that no matter how attractive something might be – whether it's another dog, person, cookie, smell, and so on – he must keep working. That worked reasonably well for sturdy dogs with good recovery and low levels of worry, but not so well for less driven dogs, sensitive dogs, and dogs with behavior issues. Not to mention the fact that some handlers weren't very comfortable forcing another being to do anything, let alone random tricks for a dog competition.

As a result, the word proofing has acquired a somewhat negative connotation for many trainers who shun compulsion. And while I'd agree that the method described above is outdated and unnecessary, the importance of teaching your dog to function under adversity is still critical. A dog who cannot perform under adversity is going to have a relatively short competition career. Proofing is an element of competition training that cannot be ignored.

Thankfully, +R (positive reinforcement) trainers can add proofing to their training without compromising their values, with two fundamental differences that distinguishes what they do from traditional proofing techniques. First, +R trainers set dogs up to succeed and then reward those good choices instead of setting dogs up to fail and punishing them. And second, +R trainers control the environment, not the dog (whenever possible). For obvious reasons, a dog's enthusiasm and self confidence stay much higher when they are repeatedly set up to succeed rather than to fail. Failing is stressful and builds worry into training. Success is uplifting and builds confidence.

There are three things to do when you're proofing the +R way:

1. Always start with challenges for your dog's current level of training, and increase those challenges as your dog gains experience.
2. Focus on controlling the proof, not your dog.
3. Be prepared to administer consequences for all choices, both good and bad.

Now, let's look at how I apply these steps when working with dogs at different levels.

The Beginning Dog

Appropriate challenge: Brito, like most puppies, is very interested in interacting with dogs, especially if something is going on, but a competition dog must learn to focus even with other dogs nearby. Early on, I began by working Brito in my bedroom with my other dogs loose outside the closed door. That is more challenging than working with the other dogs outside of the house, but easier than if they had been in the same room.

Control the proof, not the dog: Since the door was closed, Brito couldn't join the other dogs, nor could he see what they were doing. I made no effort to prevent him from leaving me; if he wanted to stare at the door or sniff underneath, that was his choice. I knew that my cookies and toys were more valuable than sniffing under the door, and therefore I would win. I don't want to use external aids to control the dog (such as a leash, luring with a cookie, scolding, etc.) because I want to teach my dogs to choose to work. I'd much rather set up a situation that makes accessing the thing he wants impossible, and to make sure that I have a very valuable reward for when he returns to me to work.

Be prepared to administer consequences: If Brito chose to leave training, he missed out on the delicious morsels or fun toys that I had. That might not matter in the beginning of a competition dog's training career, but it will matter very much as the months go by and the training time gains value. Further, training time is limited time. If his session was planned for three minutes, his detours do not necessarily extend that three minute session. When the time is up, another dog is going to work and then Brito will be on the other side of the door. He will have lost his opportunity to work.

Brito quickly learned about "opportunity cost." He always has a choice about work, but exploring the alternatives won't get him very far, and he will be losing out on delicious cookies and personal interaction. It's very possible for a young dog to spend his three minute session staring at the door or sniffing under it. But when his turn is over and he realizes he never got to work, he will have learned an important training lesson: training is a privilege, not a right. Another dog will now take his place. If I selected my proof correctly for the dog's stage of training, distractions will soon cause my dog to work very hard to focus on what we are doing together.

An Intermediate Dog

Appropriate challenge: A more challenging proof might be heeling while another dog works close by.

Control the proof, not the dog: If your dog loses attention while heeling, have the other dog stop moving – it's not much fun to stare at a dog who is simply sitting and eating cookies. If your dog actually leaves you, quickly place the OTHER dog in an ex-pen (which you placed there in advance) with his owner, who feeds his dog constantly. Your dog can circle the pen (for this scenario, I'm assuming a non-aggressive dog and a distraction dog who is happy to sit in a pen and eat treats). Keep in mind that the error started at the point where your dog lost attention, not where he actually left. That is the point in training you need to correct.

Be prepared to administer consequences: What will you do if your dog loses attention? I'd consider backing up and starting that chain over. What if he leaves you and tries to visit? Maybe the first time you'll allow him to figure it out on his own and return to training; if the other dog has been moved to an ex-pen and is being continuously fed, there will be no interaction. If it happens again, maybe you'll quietly walk up and take him gently by the collar and return him to his crate. And if this has been an ongoing issue, maybe you'll have someone else return your dog to his crate while you continue to train another dog, ending his lesson for the day altogether. (If you don't have another dog, train an imaginary

one.). And finally, don't forget to ask yourself if your dog was truly ready for this level of distraction training at all; remember, your dog should be "winning" most of the time.

I do not control dogs with a leash, a "leave it" cue, or by calling them back to work because that makes me endlessly responsible for controlling my dog's behavior. This doesn't hold up very well without a leash or under stressful conditions where my options are limited. We need the dog to learn to control his own behavior. The proof should cue the dog; once you've set up the proof, then simply let the dog choose. If they choose well, then they'll have a fantastic training session with you. Choose poorly and their training session with you may well end. No more work means no more treats, toys, and personal interaction. If your dog does not consider that a negative consequence, then there is something fundamentally wrong with your training plan. Ending work is a severe consequence if you've found motivators that your dog cares for and if you've taken care to ensure that training time is valuable.

The Advanced OTCH Dog

Appropriate challenge: When you're working with a dog who needs to stay sharp in the ring, you can pretty much go all out if you've been building up your dog's tolerance for distraction slowly and over time. I expect my fully trained dogs to be able to perform with any dog doing anything in the area, regardless of the other dog's intensity level.

Control the proof, not the dog: Obviously, your dog will fail some of your attempts at proofing. Failing once or twice is actually healthy because it gives your dog a chance to discover that their behavior has consequences, but repeated failure is a problem and suggests that something needs to change. Remember that you can tweak the intensity of the proof, the value of the reinforcer, or the challenge of the exercise.

Be prepared to administer consequences: If my dog succeeds on a more extreme proof, then I must have something to offer which is significantly greater than average. That's not the time for a jackpot of kibble; that's when I bring out a bowl of tripe. And if they fail, I'll gently remove them from training and another dog will be allowed to take their place. It works quite well.

I tend to start proofing training extremely early in training, but I'm not in any hurry to use hard consequences (removal from training) because my primary goal in training is to make my dog love training more than anything. The better a job I do, the less likely the dog is to want to engage with an alternative when the proofs become more challenging.

Too time consuming for you? No access to helpers? No matches nearby? Training is time consuming. All methods of training, whether based in positive reinforcement or not, require time. They also require additional helpers and frequent road trips. If you do not have these things, then you'll struggle badly at trial time, regardless of your training method. Creative training can minimize the amount of help you need, but will never eliminate it.

Experienced handlers put the time in to create a trial ready dog; less experienced handlers often spend the dog's career solving the problems that developed from poor foundation

skills and competing before the dog was ready. Take your time. If you do your work well, you'll reap a variety of long term benefits.

For those of you who are visual learners, here's a video of a student's dog working on proofing. Notice the corrections for errors: backing up and repeating the effort. This dog is intermediate in terms of experience. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2TqbhtvOzC4>

Part 5: Reducing Reinforcers

Creating a well-prepared team for the competition ring is not a minor matter. You need a thoughtfully trained dog who can perform in new locations under varying degrees of adversity, and who enjoys being in a competition ring. But there's more to it than that.

Until now, I haven't said a word about reinforcement. If you're a +R trainer, then you are using something (probably food or toys) to motivate your dog to learn and perform known behaviors. But in most competition rings, food and toys are not allowed. Ideally, you'll have a better plan in place than hoping for a miracle when the reinforcers are gone; you should have a systematic plan for how you'll reduce reinforcers and still maintain motivation.

This is both an art and a science. Let's start with the art.

To design an effective strategy for reducing reinforcement that will hold up in the ring, you need to know a fair amount about both your goals and the temperament of your dog. For some dogs, the only thing you have to do is substitute ring-appropriate options for your classic food and toy rewards. With these dogs, you tell them they are amazing, praise them, and play to the full extent allowed in the ring, and cheerfully move on to the next exercise where they get another chance to earn...you! Awesome, right?

So far, I've owned exactly one dog who fits this "will work for social interaction" description, though I have met others. These dogs are fabulous competitors in obedience and rally because they truly love the chance to work and interact with their owners. They have the temperament to make them excellent long-term competitors at the highest levels.

If you're lucky enough to have one of these dogs, you can reduce reinforcement by lowering the value of the classic reinforcers you use in training (for example, go from cheese to kibble), mostly to mark the behaviors that you are extra pleased with. And then go to work using praise and play as the main reward! I would suggest never eliminating the classic rewards, because you'll need them to keep the tiny details extra sharp, and the kibbles can do that for you. But the big guns? Cheese, hot dogs, bowls of tripe? Nope. Don't need it and probably shouldn't bring it out, lest the dog stop valuing your personal interaction. These dogs can work for relatively little reinforcement. Just remember that you have to behave in a similar fashion in both training and trial situations or you risk a very stressed out dog in the ring, who is unsure why you're suddenly withholding the cookies and using tons of praise that is foreign to the dog.

If you're reading this and shaking your head, convinced that your dog could not care less about interacting with you, then you'll need a different route. If your goals are very modest – maybe you only plan to compete a few times in your dog's lifetime – then you may approach this issue by slowly extending the quantity of work required for each reward. Instead of a retrieve over high jumping earning a cookie, add a bit of heeling before the cookie emerges. Work your way up to several exercises in a row before giving anything to your dog.

When you compete, you will need to fool your dog into believing that you have the cookies inside the ring. Hand them a few cookies before entering the ring, and your dog will assume that you have them in the ring, too. This approach will buy you several competitions for most dogs. Since you have made sure that your dog can comfortably work for extended periods of time, your stinginess won't be noted too quickly, especially if you've done a good job with ring preparation. Of course, this method tends to make handlers completely neurotic and can permanently sour your dog on the ring if you suddenly decide you really like competition and want to continue on to higher levels. The fact is, you can only fool your dog so many times.

If you don't have a "work for interaction" dog and know that you'd like to compete more than a handful of times, or that you'd like to reach the higher levels and actually campaign your dog to a UDX or an OTCH title, then you need a better approach than hoping to fool your dog.

Your dog isn't going to work just to make you happy, so you'll need a bit more science on your side. Your dog needs to be taught there will be intervals of time where there will be no rewards, but that at the end of that interval, something amazing will be coming. To help your dog learn this concept, start by putting a bowl of the most high value food you can think of on a table nearby. Make sure your dog sees it. Now, ask for one simple behavior. When your dog performs (which they should if you did the proofing work I described in the last blog), go with your dog and give them the entire bowl.

When this is mastered it's time to raise criteria a bit. SLOWLY start to string together more and more behaviors and exercises before releasing your dog to the reward. Continue on until your dog can comfortably perform for longer than the length of time asked for in the ring. If your dog ever leaves you and attempts to self reward, quietly remove the dog from training and end the session. Don't stop your dog from leaving but do make sure that they cannot access the jackpot.

For routine training and maintenance behaviors, you'll continue on as normal with minor treats for reinforcement. Then, once per session, you'll bring out the big guns. You'll get formal and your dog will need to perform correctly with no food on your body, no extra cues or help from you, and no begging!

What if your dog fails? If your dog actually goes to the reward on their own, then you have a proofing problem – deal with that. But if your dog simply fails to perform, possibly because they are staring at the food dish, then you have options. Pick the one that makes the most sense for your dog.

1. Reset your dog and repeat the failed exercise.
2. Place your dog on a brief down stay or in a crate for up to a minute before trying the failed exercise again.
3. Reset your dog. Repeat the exercise before the one that was failed AND the one that the dog failed.
4. Place your dog on a brief down stay or in a crate for up to a minute or so, and then try the prior two exercises again.
5. Reset your dog and start the ENTIRE chain over – the chain begins with the very first thing you did together. So if your dog failed at the 2 minute mark, then you'll repeat the entire 2 minutes.
6. Place your dog on a stay or in a crate for up to five minutes, and then try the entire chain again, from start to finish.
7. Walk away from the session altogether. There will be no second chance for your dog to earn that highly desired reinforcer.

How do you pick the correct consequence? It depends on the temperament of the dog, your goals, and your willingness to hold the line. I tend to run between options one and four most of the time, but if I had a very sophisticated dog that was being retrained, I'd probably consider all of the possibilities.

This is not a short term proposition. Done well, it will take you several months to teach your dog, so you probably want to start this process relatively early in your training career. I started this with Lyra using the retrieve on flat exercise. It took about three weeks before she understood that whatever she wanted was contingent on an extremely high quality retrieve on flat under intense distraction.

The above described methods are not mutually exclusive, and this list is far from comprehensive, but it should give you a starting place for thinking about the relevant issues. Indeed, designing a plan to reduce reinforcement is a tricky thing, and the trainer should be flexible if it appears that changes need to be made for a given dog.

Part 6: You!

So far, we've focused on the skills your dog needs to be ready to compete. But your dog is only half the equation; we also need to consider what you, the handler, can do to make your team likely to succeed.

Competition success on any given day starts when you first step foot on the show grounds. Do you know when is the best time to arrive? Some dogs will need to arrive early so they can acclimate to the new surrounds, while others will deflate the longer you are on the trial grounds. You need to figure out which dog you have before you ever show up, and the easiest way to do this is to attend matches and training classes. Pay attention to what happens when you show up early or late. What works best for your dog?

The next consideration is how long before your turn you should take your dog out of his crate. Again, this depends on your dog, and you should figure it out before the show. As a general rule, the less drive your dog has, the longer you should wait until you get him out.

What kind of warm up does your dog need? Novice exhibitors have a tendency to "hyper train" in the minutes before entering the ring. 100 leash pops and 100 cookies, all in the time it takes for the prior dog to complete their run. Regardless of how you feel about leash pops or cookies, I can tell you that more often than not, when I see teams doing this, they fall apart in the ring. Usually the dog has been driven into complete handler avoidance. Keep in mind that most dogs get tired and bored with picky training; if you ask them to do too much before you go in the ring, they might not have anything left when it's time to perform.

So what do you do? A down stay? Fronts and finishes? Sitting in heel position at attention? Heeling? How much and for how long? Personally, I have a waiting position I call "squishing" that I use with my big dogs. With Brito, it is extremely likely that I will carry him and not put him on the ground until we are walking through the ring entrance. Either way, we will enter the ring quickly and with purpose.

What is your demeanor before entering the ring? I've noticed that most handlers do a very poor job of connecting with their dogs before entering the ring. Half sit their dogs in heel position and then proceed to ignore them, and the other half bounce around and get hysterical and hyper – to no effect other than to create avoidance in their dogs. I doubt that these same handlers behave this way in training, so I can only imagine that it took about one show for their dogs to figure out that dog shows are weird and stressful places. If you want your dog to perceive you as a leader, then you need to behave like one. Neither hysterical and intense handlers nor bored and disconnected ones inspire confidence and the desire to follow.

You also need to know how you plan to handle delays. Sometimes the judge needs a minute between each dog to tabulate the last dog's scores or look something up in a rule book; I've seen dogs simply get tired of sitting there. By the time they enter the ring, there will be no dog left to work. What do you plan to do to deal with delays?

Will you use rewards immediately before entering the ring? The answer to this question depends on how you've trained your dog. Some dogs are trained to understand that only great work in the ring leads to treats. Other dogs are being fooled into performing for a cookie in the ring. The answer to this question will determine if you use treats before you start your turn.

There are a lot of things to consider, and you aren't even in the ring yet! Once the judge does call you in, though, you need to know how you plan to handle your dog.

Where will you look during each exercise? In heeling, you might look at your dog, the ground in front of you, or the horizon. On the recall, do you look at your feet or at your dog as she comes in towards you? On the retrieves, do you look at your dog when you give your cues or where you want the dog to go? The ring isn't the time to figure these things out; make a decision in advance and make sure your dog sees plenty of it before you compete.

Do you know the heeling pattern and exactly where the judge starts each exercise? I have seen exhibitors who don't know, and as a result, they are unable to lead their dog with authority from exercise to exercise. How will you move between exercises? Formal heeling, informal movement, and (in novice) guiding by the collar are all options. Work that out before the show.

What is your plan for praising and interacting between exercises? If the only time you praise your dog without a cookie is in the ring, I can tell you that your dog is not going to be impressed. Your dog must see your plan in training so that it becomes comfortable.

And finally, what is your plan if it all goes to hell? We all know that sometimes even the best dogs (and handlers!) have off days. What are your options? That's our next topic.

Part 7: Preparing for Failure

All dog and handler teams fail at one time or another. It's no shame to fail a trial, or even to discover that you were much less prepared than you thought you were, but you'll want to give some thought to damage control before you go into the competition ring. Just in case.

Let's start at the beginning. You get to the show site and you know that something is wrong. Your dog seems completely disinterested in you and working. Your dog has stress diarrhea. Your dog can't get his nose off the ground no matter what motivators are available. Your dog won't take your treats and could not care less about his favorite toys. What do you do?

I'd suggest waiting as long as possible to formally check in to your ring, and then see how much dog you have. If you can't wait any longer without inconveniencing other exhibitors or ring staff, and if your dog will not engage, I'd pull out of the competition. It is a rare dog that cannot engage when you have your food and toys that suddenly engages when you step in front of a judge. Okay, maybe "rare" is the wrong word. "Unheard of" might be better.

But... you just couldn't do it. You're at the show and you just have to try. Or maybe your dog didn't fall apart until you were already in the ring. Or maybe your dog started out fine and was well along in the class before the downward slide began. Now what?

You always have the option of leaving the ring. That is the rule. You can politely tell the judge that you will be leaving. Do not ask; they might say no. Instead, thank the judge, take your dog gently by the collar, and head for the exit. The steward will give you your leash. Your judge may be surprised by your decision and may even discourage you, but you need to know that you have the right to leave the ring, and that there is no penalty for doing so. You will not affect the point schedule or the placements/rankings of any of the other dogs because you were not excused. You are simply leaving. If the judge is upset and decides to write you up, they will quickly be informed that the AKC has clarified that you have the right to leave with no repercussion.

This is a relatively new happening in the world of obedience, but leaving has been common in agility for a very long time – and the sky hasn't fallen over there! Until recently, it was considered bad sportsmanship to leave, but now I see it as a good training decision and much kinder to the dog than finishing in misery. You are NOT negatively affecting any of your fellow competitors, and indeed, you are doing them a favor if your dog's behavior suggests that he might leave the ring and make mischief, soil the ring, or behave so poorly that judging is being dragged out as your dog wanders about and does everything but work with you.

When your dog is having a complete meltdown, the choice is obvious. But what if your dog simply fails to respond to a cue? In this case, know the rules. Is this a failure? A substantial deduction? No worry at all? This information is crucial to managing your ring performance to optimum effect. You don't need to know exactly how much every mistake will cost you, but you do need to know enough to make educated decisions in the moment.

For example, if you start out heeling and your dog simply sits there, give a second cue! It's points off, but if your dog never moves, then it's failure for sure. If your dog starts to sniff and you know that your dog is going to get sucked in by the smells, help your dog by cuing him to heel again! On the other hand, if your dog fails to respond to a first cue during an exercise where this is an automatic failure, I'd still suggest giving the second cue immediately. You've already failed, so you might as well help your dog get through it with minimal trauma.

Here are a few more examples:

You ask your dog to stand in novice and he simply sits there. Now what? Should you physically stand your dog? Give a second cue to stand? Or assume the exercise is over and look pleadingly at the judge? Know the rules: because the exercise does not start until you leave your dog, simply keep calm and re-cue your dog, assisting as needed. If it is helpful to you, then you may gently physically position your dog; this is allowed without penalty in AKC.

You ask your dog to stay on the recall. When you turn around, your dog is now lying down. What should you do? Tell your dog to sit? Wait for the judge to cue you to call your dog? Return to your dog on your own? Again, know the rules. You have not failed unless your dog followed you in. While lying down is a substantial deduction, you can still save the exercise. Just wait and then continue at the judge's direction.

You have asked your dog to heel and he simply sits there as you set off without him. Now what? Should you cue again, return to your dog, or continue the heeling pattern without him? If you know the rules, you know that I recommend giving a second command. You'll lose points, but you'll fail outright if you continue without him.

There are many more examples like this. If you're not sure of the rules, get the rule book and read it carefully. Speak with a judge or an instructor who you trust to know the answers. You can also ask on Facebook or a chat group, but be aware that the first answer offered may not be correct (my experience is that errors are corrected very quickly). If you simply want to qualify, knowing the answers to these types of questions will tell you exactly how to proceed.

Part 8: Should You Return for the Group Stays?

Alright, you went through your individual obedience round and your dog did not qualify. Maybe it was a simple matter like failure to recall on the first command in Novice, or maybe it was a basic free-for-all, with your dog wandering and sniffing throughout the off-leash heeling routine. The judge invites you back for the group exercises. Should you return?

Remember that the rules say that you do not have to finish the class; you may simply let the judge know that you will not be returning for sits and downs. Yes, you can do that, and no, it's not poor sportsmanship. Indeed, most of the experienced exhibitors in my area have been doing it for several years.

But...should you?

I recently attended a show where almost all of the non-qualifying Novice exhibitors returned to the ring for sits and downs, which suggests that either they were unaware that they did not need to return, or they had a desire to be there. On that day, three dogs out of approximately fifteen left their spot and were asked to leave before the long down, and a couple of other dogs changed their position.

In every case, these dogs had already Non-qualified (NQ'd) on the individual exercises. So why were they there? I decided to ask a few of the exhibitors afterwards why they made the choice to return for groups. I got four answers:

1. For the ring experience.
2. To see how it would go.
3. I paid for the class.
4. I have to finish the whole class.

Here are my thoughts on each of these:

1. Return for the ring experience. Yes, all of those dogs got ring experience, and each learned a valuable lesson. Those dogs learned that in a ring, you can pretty much do what you want on sits and downs and nothing will happen. You can wander, sniff, and explore until someone catches you. You can check out that dog you've been eyeing but couldn't get to earlier. You can change positions and make yourself more comfortable while your handler glares at you from 40 feet away, but does nothing. Or you can perform correctly with no response for that either. While learning has taken place, it is not the kind of learning that most trainers want to see. Unless you're still qualifying, your additional ring experience will either be neutral or negative – that's about it. Is it worth it?
2. Return to "see how it would go." You cannot train at a show, you can only observe. If you are at a dog show, you should already KNOW what your dog is going to do. If it goes differently, you should be surprised, because it means that there's a hole in your training plan that you didn't know about. A dog show isn't a very good place to see what is going to happen because there is nothing you can do if your dog fails to perform. The purpose of

matches, run-throughs, and training classes is to see how your dog is going to do and then address issues immediately if you don't like the result. Then your dog can have a positive learning experience.

3. I paid for the class. You paid for the entire experience, and a chance to qualify, which didn't go so well. I have yet to meet any person or dog who actively enjoys sits and downs; you just stare at your dog for minutes or stand behind a screen, wondering what is happening out there. That's not much fun for most of us, but if you truly enjoy that, then I guess it makes sense to return for the groups (and hope for the best).

4. I have to finish the whole class. Once upon a time, you did have to return, but those days have passed. At this point, you do not have to return to the ring, and you will in no way negatively affect anyone else or the points, rankings, etc. if you don't.

Note that all of the above reasons are really about you and your dog. While I cannot think of one good training reason why you would want to return, I would be remiss not to turn my attention away from you for a moment and consider your fellow competitors, because there is one overwhelming reason why you should not return to the ring, and it is not about you.

You are going back into the group ring with dogs who are still qualifying. That means that until this point, they have demonstrated enough skill and training to be there, which you and your dog have not. Like you, they have also paid their entry fee, and they would like to maximize their chances of getting through this part, too. Unfortunately, there appears to be a correlation between dogs who are insufficiently trained on the individual exercises and dogs who are insufficiently trained for the group stays.

If I haven't been clear enough, I will try one last time: your choice to return creates risk for others if your dog fails or makes mischief. That mischief might be as mild as changing position or staring at another dog, or as great as an all-out attack, but regardless, you do not need to be there, possibly creating a negative outcome for your fellow competitor.

Over the years, I have been loud and vocal about sits and downs: I think they suck. I have no interest in leaving my dogs on a stay with groups of unknown dogs with variable degrees of training – not because I do not trust my dogs and their training, but because I have no reason to trust your dogs and your training, especially in the Novice class where I probably do not know you. In the group exercises, my training and my dog's welfare is very much affected by your training.

For whatever reason, it appears that AKC is wedded to the group stays, so the next best option is obvious. Only dogs who have qualified on the individual exercises should return to the ring.

Judges have the option of doing that right now by making LIBERAL use of the new rules regarding which dogs are invited back to complete the class. If you are a judge, it's worth considering how you might feel if there is a bad event in your ring and the dogs involved

did not need to be there. You'll also find that exhibitors like me will seek you out once we learn that you are committed to maximizing safety in your ring.

I hope I've given someone food for thought. If you decide you are going to return to the ring for the stay exercise, take a moment to check your reasoning; hopefully it's more substantial than "because you've always done it that way" or a stubborn refusal to even consider the issue carefully because "no one is going to tell you what to do." And if you are an instructor, take a moment to talk with your students about these issues too.

Part 9: Putting It All Together

If you've read this far, you may be thinking that all of this trial readiness stuff is just too much work, but recognize that I rarely train my dogs for more than an hour or two each week. "Smart" training isn't particularly time consuming if you carefully consider what you wish to accomplish in each training session and then set up that session to meet your goals. Let's take a moment to review what you'll want to do to have a trial ready dog:

Start with working towards high quality behaviors chains by focusing on excellent base behaviors. If you're a more experienced trainer you probably know this. If you haven't read it already, take a look at my e-book 'Understanding Behavior Chains' to help you create very high quality chains for the competition ring.

Next take those base behaviors on the road. When you do your daily errands, make a point of bringing your dog along and spending a few minutes in front of the library, post office, grocery store, etc., getting in a short practice session. Remember that you can ask for shorter or simplified chains with higher rates of reinforcement, but do not allow for poorer quality work.

Now make sure that your dog loves the competition ring and gets excited when she sees one. This is simple to accomplish; simply walk into ring entrances and have a party with your dog!

Add proofing to your routine training, so that simple behavior chains without complexity or distraction appear to be exceptionally easy for your dog. If your dog can work with high quality even when other dogs are playing nearby, then you're well on your way to having a dog that can also work inside of a competition ring in the middle of a dog show.

Can your dog perform at a high level of ability, even when you have no cookies or toys to reward their efforts? Take some time to create a plan for reducing your reinforcers, and both of you will be much more confident in the ring

Are you ready to lead your dog to success in the ring? Make sure that you have a solid plan for handling your dog on the show grounds. This plan should include knowing how much acclimation time your dog needs, what warm up routine works best, and how you will handle any unforeseen delays. You should also know how you handle each exercise within the ring and what you will do if your ring time begins to go poorly. If you are well versed on the rules you may find that you can "save" a poor run, simply by knowing how you can and should react to any given situation.

Finally, always keep in mind the well being of your dog, your training and the well being of your fellow exhibitors. Be aware that you can leave the ring or not return for the group stays if you are doing very poorly, and in most cases this is an excellent choice to make.

I hope this short book helps someone prepare with more consideration for their next trial. Dog shows are a chance to showcase what you and your dog have learned and mastered together. Enjoy your time in the ring and prepare thoroughly!

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