

A FRESH PERSPECTIVE

CONFORMATION SHOW PARTICIPATION

by CARRIE FLETCHER

Themes that are discussed frequently at most Conformation shows include the lack of participation, inability to gain majors and/or simply points towards championships, declining numbers and most importantly, lack of interest in new participants. Rarely does this discussion address why is this happening or how to improve the situation. Most treat this growing concern as someone else's or AKC's problem, failing to consider every participant can improve the situation. This is the story of a Southern Californian newbie, hopefully the take-away will be how each of us can improve participation.

In October 2017, I purchased my first AKC registered dog—a Toy Fox Terrier puppy named Jamboree's Key to my Heart, call name "Kekey". Kekey was purchased to fill the void left from the unexpected and traumatic loss of the family's rescue Terrier mix. Little did I know that this decision would start me on the path to the rewarding experience of Conformation Showing. It has been a very steep learning curve, that initially I was unsure I was willing to take on. Conformation showing was not part of my purchase decision nor did the thought even enter my mind. I was simply looking for a pet. So, what



happened to change my mind? This is where Ed and Carol Fernandes of Toy Fox Terrier Jamboree enter the picture. Like many, I looked for a reputable breeder close to home but found none with puppies available. Ed and Carol had puppies due on my birthday and my decision was made to purchase.

While waiting for Kekey to grow enough to come to her forever home, Ed and Carol stayed in touch with frequent pictures, words of encouragement and tips on getting prepared for the new puppy. As our relationship progressed, it became clear that they thought this puppy was special. Multiple times Ed let me know, it would not be a problem if I changed my mind or was unable to pick up the puppy. When it was time to pick up Kekey, Ed planted the seed that this puppy has excellent conformation show potential. I did not even know what this was, other than Westminster Show broadcast on television. This was my catalyst to further investigating this possibility.

Shortly, after bringing Kekey home, Susan McCoy of Westgate Toy Fox Terriers called indicating she had puppies available. After a few awkward moments, I explained I just brought home a puppy that the breeder was encouraging me to show. Sue generously offered to look over the puppy and give her opinion on suitability

for showing. We made plans to meet at a future show. However, I was still unsure and lacked knowledge about conformation showing.

In the meantime, through social media and the breeder, I had met Wendy Howard and arranged a puppy playdate. Wendy shared her experience being new to conformation while showing Ultra Quest Go for the Gold, call name Oliver. Still not knowing much about conformation show, I asked Wendy to mentor me. Wendy was honest about lacking experience and shared that Susan McCoy mentored her. Wendy has become a friend, a valuable sounding board and a great resource for sharing my experiences and concerns.

So, I attended my first live conformation show with the plan to meet Susan McCoy and obtain an unbiased opinion on Kekey's suitability for show. She took one look at Kekey informing me she is built well, self-stacks and is not afraid of the table. To be honest, I had read about these things in the show books but didn't really understand what this meant. Sue patiently took me out to the show rings and explained the process. She helped me get a proper show lead and explained how to use it. Most importantly, Sue agreed to mentor Kekey and I, should I choose to show. Additionally, Sue introduced me to a professional handler, Allan Chambers.

Allan, also, noted what a nice bitch Kekey is and inquired if I was going to show her.

Fast forward a couple of months, Susan and I meet at another show. Sue looked over how Kekey had grown and helped with techniques to walk her on the show lead. We talked some more about showing and Sue gave me the best advice I have received. She told me I will not know if I can/like to show unless I give it a try and you should try since you have a very nice show bitch. With that advice, she helped me fill out the paperwork for our first show—February 2018, Del Mar Kennel Club in San Diego. Ed and Carol were delighted that I had decided to enter Kekey in a show.

The first show, unknown to me, happened to be a Toy Group Specialty show. This was quite the confidence builder, since there were only two of us in the Toy Fox Terrier breed—one dog and one bitch. Those of you who have shown for years may know what is coming but I did not. After a short spin around the ring and a quick stand on the table, we were being given this "huge" impressive ribbon that at the time was bigger than Kekey. I must be honest, until Allan explained I really did not understand exactly why we received this awesome ribbon. The next day of the show, I must have done something very wrong in the ring; the





judge, though he was kind, suggested handler training.

This judge was not the only one that noted my short comings in the ring. Set up next to me was Shelly Juden of Elitist Papillon & Whippets, waiting to show her Papillon. She mentioned that she saw us in the ring and wanted to know if I was looking for handler training. She knew of a very good handler trainer and introduced to Arvilla White of Whitestar Papillons. Arvilla confirmed she does training at her home and only takes on a few students at a time that are committed to learning, willing to spend the time to learn and willing to put in the practice time with their dog. I was asked to call her the following week.

It took most of the week to make the call. We worked out a schedule for the initial training session. Arvilla's training is very straight forward and full of all the insight of her many years of showing and raising different dog breeds. Not only has Arvilla trained on what to do in the ring, she has made sure I understand the "code of the ring" including how to dress, responding to various judge instructions, how to be a courteous handler. Every training

session, I learn more and build my confidence. This training was so valuable and successful, that after two sessions, Kekey and I completed two back-to-back 3-point majors. During one, I had become confused about when to re-enter the ring and Allan had my back and made sure that I was in the ring when required.

Ed and Carol, Wendy, Susan, Allan and Arvilla became my teachers, support team, cheerleaders and most importantly, my friends. I was very fortunate to establish this solid support team early. Surrounding yourself with a well-balanced support team, including breeder, mentor, professional handler, trainer and friends, will help build your confidence, answer your questions, validate your readiness and celebrate your successes.

I have been told over and over that my experience is not the norm for most new participants. It is like the "stars aligned" for me from the breeder honoring his commitment to selling Kekey even knowing I most likely would not show, happening upon someone who previously had been a successful newbie, gaining a mentor, having a

professional handler to keep things moving correctly in the ring and a well experienced handler trainer. If a few seasoned participants start to reach out, many more newbies can have a positive experience and learn to love to show. In summary, everyone can choose to help make conformation showing friendly to new participants or continue to face the declining numbers.

This newbie's final thoughts on how everyone can make a difference at little to no cost, other than a few kind words and a little time:

Breeders - when a novice is interested in your pups, evaluate interest and educate client about conformation show; introduce them to sports available to registered pups; encourage participation; when possible, help new owners with identifying people in their area with the same breed; and finally, patiently answer the questions to the best of your ability.

Conformation Show Participants - be friendly, we are all people first; if someone is struggling, ask if you can help; embrace good sportsmanship attitudes—win or lose with grace and class.

New Owners - social media can be a good sounding board and way to identify local people with the same breed; look into a mentoring program; check out shows and talk to people; check out local kennel clubs; form a support team include breeder, mentor, professional handler, trainers, other show people both within and outside your breed; most important—Don't give up.

Mentors - reach out, be encouraging, make the time, facilitate introductions and a big thank you for volunteering your time.

Professional Handlers - understanding this is your livelihood, a few kind words and tips can go a long way, you don't have to give away all your hard-earned secrets to make a difference.

Trainers - just do your thing and help prepare the newbies for their successful showing.

Suggestions to AKC - reach out to those that have never registered a dog by sending them a package including dog standard, local contacts for kennel clubs, registered mentors, summary of activities to consider (i.e. conformation, obedience, agility, scent work, barn hunt, etc). ■