

UKC Conformation Shows: A Beginner's Perspective

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Editor's (and author's) note: This is the first in a series of articles written by UHWVA Members about various activities they have shared with their dogs. While it is my hope that other members will find these personal accounts instructive, if not motivational, by their very nature they are not to be viewed as expert advice. This applies particularly strongly with this first installment. Enjoy...

When I first reserved my Hungarian Wirehaired Vizsla puppy from Seraphim Kennels in Illinois, I told Peg, the breeder, that my new puppy was to be first and foremost a companion. I had never trained a bird dog before and also thought that would be a fun thing to do. Peg, trying to match the best puppy up with the appropriate new owner, asked if I was interested in showing or breeding. Years ago I had entered my last dog, a German Shorthaired Pointer, in a single AKC show and that was



enough to cement my opinion about the conformation show experience. It wasn't fun, I didn't like it, and told Peg that showing was simply not for me.

Upon arriving home, we registered with the UKC per Peg's instructions, and Winnie and I began our life together as planned. I enrolled in Puppy Kindergarten, worked on crate training and housebreaking, tried to socialize her to different experiences as much as possible, and started exposing her to birds in the field.

Then a friend brought to my attention a UKC show near where we live, and suggested I give it a try. Winnie would be just shy of six months old at that show, making her eligible for the Puppy Novice class. As it turns out, the woman teaching my puppy obedience class was a

UKC judge and taught an informal, walk-in conformation handling class following the obedience class. She encouraged me further, ensuring me that in the Puppy Novice class, while the expectations for the handler are very low, those for the dog are even lower. It's all just for fun and the experience, she said.

She also spoke of the stark difference between the AKC experience I had years earlier – a tense, intimidating and unfun day - and the UKC experience I was now contemplating. It promised to be a laid back event. I was told that people are eager to help new participants and – if nothing else – it would be an excellent opportunity for socialization with many other dogs and people.

While I was skeptical of the difference between what I knew of the AKC shows and what I heard about the UKC shows, I signed up for our very first show, hosted by the Capitol Terrier Association and held in nearby Manassas, Virginia. I emailed Nicole, the show secretary and basically told her it was our first show and we didn't know what we were doing. I made sure the judges don't care if a puppy can't stand still. I asked questions like what if Winnie poops in the ring and could someone let me know if my entry form was in order when it arrived because the form made no sense to me. I was ridiculous. Nicole was patient, friendly and helpful, and was excited that we chose theirs as our first UKC show. (Only later when I witnessed what goes into hosting such an event would I have an inkling as to how incredibly busy she must have been preparing for it while she was taking the time to answer all my silly questions.)

Then there I was. Staring down the couch at my five-month-old puppy, wondering how in one month we were going to be presentable in a show ring when she

had not yet learned how to Stand. So I started working Stand into our regular obedience routine around the house.

One of the things that worried me was that we teach Sit in our house. With three dogs (the other two are Jack Russells), it's imperative that we are able to just put everyone in 'Park' every now and then just to calm things down. But I had heard that people who show dogs don't teach them to sit because they need to stand in the ring. (I also am continually told not to teach a pointing dog to sit because you don't want them to sit on point.) But our dogs sit and will always sit, so whether it makes my conformation or hunt training harder or not, she simply has to learn that Stand is a different command than Sit, and they are not interchangeable.

That week we stayed after obedience class for the conformation session, and in the first few minutes of class I realized I had worried too much about the sitting thing (this is not unprecedented). She tried to sit once, I gently pulled her leash forward, told her to stand, and she stood for the next ten minutes, watching the instructor go over each dog as if she was judging, moving up as each dog got sent around to the back of the line, and patiently standing for her own examination.

Then we went around the ring, and everyone in the class exclaimed how great she looked when she was moving! The instructor said proudly that I was a fast learner, perhaps overlooking the fact that she had not actually taught me anything yet. But I showered Winnie with praise, we repeated the exercise with all the dogs a second time, and I headed home with a lot more confidence than I had hours earlier.

We had a couple more classes to practice before the show. While I could get her to stand, I had a lot of trouble placing her feet in a good stack. I'd move her front right an inch, she'd move her back left about eight inches. But

I remembered the part about low expectations and decided we were ready enough.

On the morning of the show, I went over my painstaking checklist, which reminded me to bring things like "crate," "treats" and "dog." (Hey, I was nervous!) We arrived at the show early, found a place to set up Winnie's



crate and checked in with Nicole. She was extremely helpful in getting me situated and made me feel right at home. Then when I brought Winnie in from the car, I started making friends left and right. Everyone was curious about what she was (most guessed Spinone) but by all accounts, she was sweet and beautiful. All the compliments put me at ease, and as soon as I mentioned it was our first show, people all around offered to help explain how things worked. In addition, Winnie was calm, despite being in an utterly new and bizarre situation surrounded by more dogs than she had ever seen in her life.

When it came time for the Gundogs, I really started to get nervous. I watched a lot of the handlers and

I watched the judge. It was our turn to enter the ring, and the judge told us to stand for examination and as she approached us, Winnie wagged and wiggled and turned around in a circle. Then the judge started talking baby talk and it was all over! But it put us both at ease, and she had us go across the ring and back. When we returned back at the judge, Winnie stopped at a very nice stand. After some more baby talk from the judge, we went around the ring and by the time we got back to where we started, our first ever ribbons were waiting for us!

There was only one other novice puppy in the Gundog group, a Golden Retriever much younger than Winnie. So when we both went around the ring, Winnie was much more under control and the judge awarded her with the blue ribbon! The afternoon show went the same way so we came home with two 'Group' wins even

though the group consisted of one other dog and the win didn't count anyway because it was in the Puppy Novice class. But it was a huge confidence boost, and

to return to the judge myself (putting Winnie obviously off to the side and out of position). She recommended a different show lead than the one we were using, and gave tips on how to handle it cleanly so it's not a distraction to the judge. Basically a lot of what I learned was how to not screw up what Winnie was already doing!



a long but thrilling day in which Winnie made a big impression on judges and spectators alike! We had a picture taken with her very first judge, Jeanne Heager, and headed home.

With Puppy Novice behind us (Winnie turned six months later that week), we set our sights on our first REAL show! Lucky for us, the fine, hard working folks at Capitol Terrier Association were having another show at the same location just six weeks later, a natural choice for our next show. But we had work to do! I was at a loss for how to get her to stack more consistently, so I enrolled in a basic handling class. There were four classes and countless opportunities to practice before the show, and I really wanted to make the most of our time so we could look our best in front of our friends and new fans at the CTA.

A few minutes into our first basic handling class, I walked to the ring next door and joined the intermediate class instead. Our brief experience already had us beyond the basic level, and I immediately loved the intermediate instructor, Gale. She emphasized that Winnie's still a puppy, shouldn't be pushed too hard, and she'll settle down as she matures and as we practice. But I learned a lot about how best to present Winnie to the judge – things like where to stand, how to bring her back straight to the judge rather than

ing really great!

When we got to the show I noticed a LOT of Gundogs! Seven breeds represented in the group that weekend: Portugese Pointers, Irish Water Spaniels, Labs, Goldens, Standard Poodles, Springer Spaniels and the lone Hungarian Wirehaired Vizsla! Being the only one of her breed, though the judge can and will withhold a ribbon



if they don't think the dog is worthy, advancing to the Group ring was largely a formality. But Winnie did great and we were happy to win our Best in Class, Best Female and Best of Breed ribbons and wait for our chance to compete against the winners from the other breeds.

With the Gundog group lineup set, we nervously entered the ring again. I knew we had to place ahead of another dog for the show to count as a Competition win (three competition wins are required for the title of Champion). The judge called out the Springer Spaniel first. Then, much to my surprise, she called us out second! My wife watching from ringside and several other people we had met who were pulling for Winnie cheered loudly, and as the rest of the group was set and we all went around the ring one more time I can't remember ever being more proud. The Springer ahead of her went on to win Best in Show.

The blur continued as she placed third in the Group for the afternoon show (behind the Springer and Portuguese Pointer), then repeated Sunday placing second in both Groups! I joked with the owner of the Springer, who finished ahead of us in both of Sunday's shows again and

went on to win Best in Show for the second time in as many days, that Winnie was growing quite familiar with the view of that Springer's rear end! But I also told her we were proud to finish second three times behind such a fine dog that went on to win Best in Show twice.

So under judge Matthew Proctor on Sunday afternoon of her first show weekend since Puppy Novice, Winnie earned the points necessary to secure the title of UKC Champion!

I will forever treasure the experience we gained together as we worked toward this show, and I highly recommend that anyone who has never considered showing their HWV to find a show nearby and give it a try. The time spent in preparation is extremely rewarding, the handling is a great form of obedience training and the grooming is important quality time too. But the bond you'll build with your dog - not just leading up to the show but as you enter that ring to work together and work for each other — is priceless.

To find a UKC event near you, visit <http://www.ukcdogs.com>. To follow more of Winnie's adventures, please visit <http://www.hwvwinnie.blogspot.com>.

A New Wire-Haired Vizsla Book!

A new book on the Wire-Haired Vizsla has just been published and is now available. The book is 100 pages long, with 23 of those pages written in Hungarian, and the rest in English. The book contains lots of photos, introductions to many kennels worldwide, info on Hungarian work and competition rules, as well as info on US field and show rules, breed standards, and much much more!

The book was put together by Zsafia Miczek of Zoldmali Kennels in Hungary and is available from her by contacting her at : zsofi@zoldmali.hun

In the US, the cost is \$15 and book orders are being handled by Carolyn DeFiore : hwvizsla@yahoo.com 734-699-9925.

