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Mental Focus and Staying Grounded at Trials

by Diane Currie Niland, Obedience Editor

I just returned from a week on the Carolina shore. Slowing down and spending time by the water gave me time to think about the mental side of competing in obedience. The waves crashing in on the beach can be compared to the dog show environment. The water and waves roll in and out and are continually changing the surroundings.

There are unique sounds, smells and sights that change constantly. When we first arrive at a show site it is ever changing. The sounds are new and there is activity all around. For our dogs they see, hear and smell different things. Everything is new to them. As handlers we need to acclimate to the new environment also. It is important for us as handlers to ground ourselves in this environment so that we can provide a sense of normality and relaxation for ourselves and our dogs. We can do this through simple breathing exercises.

Let's go back to the wave analogy. The surface of the ocean is the dog show environment. It's a bit frantic and noisy. Your mission is to find that space underneath the waves, that quiet space where there is stillness. The space where the franticness ends and the peace begins. You can center and ground yourself through breath. Try this: inhale deeply for a six count, hold for either a two or a four count, and then exhale for a six count. Focus on the breath and only the breath. Centering ourselves in breath helps us separate from the commotion around us and

allows us to just be in the moment. Practice this at home for a few minutes each day. It is best to work on it in a quiet area so you can become aware of your breath. Once you get used to the practice, begin using it in other areas—at work, watching television or talking on the phone. See how it begins to settle you. Try to use the practice prior to responding to a stimulus. For example, if you have kids and they are acting out (the stimulus), prior to responding, practice breathing mindfully a few times and see if this makes a difference in your response. Instead of stimulus-response, try stimulus-mindful breath-response.

Next time you go to a show, set up your crate and settle your dog. Then take some time to focus on your breath. If there are too many distractions around you then go to your car and do it. Once you feel comfortable with the breathing use visualization as you breathe deeply. Visualize the depth of the connection between you and your dog. The attention to breath will help bring you into the moment and settle your nerves. The beauty of this practice is that everyone needs to breathe. You can sit and do this without

anyone even knowing that you are working on this. Begin to breathe deeply, and send breath to any area of your body that may be feeling tension. Give yourself permission to be calm and relaxed.

Here are a few general tips to keep you focused and grounded at shows:

1. Get to the trial early so you have ample time to set up and become familiar with your surroundings. Know where your ring is and pick up your number. Think about the path you and your dog will travel to the ring. It sounds silly, but sometimes in crowded show venues the most direct route is not the easiest, least stressful way to get to the ring. Think about how you will get to the ring in the most stress-free manner possible. Allow your dog to get familiar with the environment. Our dogs read our emotions so well and if we are frazzled because we feel rushed or nervous then our dogs will pick up on this energy. Arriving to the show site early allows you to decompress and relax a bit once you arrive. Your dog can relax in their crate and adjust to the new sounds, sights and smells.
2. Once you and your dog are settled, sit down and focus on your breath to help you relax. Remember to find that space underneath the waves, beneath the commotion to center you. Practice your breathing to help relax you and quiet your mind. This will help you be in the moment and focus in on your dog. When competing, think about the moment that you are in. Don't jump ahead. When we jump ahead we lose our concentration and that is when mistakes are made. Remember to keep your breath calm in the ring. I know this sounds like a tall order when you are competing, but as you prepare for each exercise make a habit of taking deep, controlled breaths. A lot of times when we are under stress we hold our breath or we start breathing in a shallow manner. Just be aware of your breath and use it to settle yourself. Focus on the task at hand and just enjoy the moment that you are in.
3. Focus on what you can control, and don't dwell on what you can't control. For example, if there isn't a lot of warm up area at the trial site the situation is out of your control. Don't dwell on it or complain about it. Warm up outside instead. If there is not a decent area outside then just do some small quarter turns and a few steps of heeling and halts inside. The point is that you can't change the situation—it is out of your control so you need to make the most of your circumstances and do what you can. You are wasting your energy if you complain about it. Know what you have power over and what you do not have power over. Life is full of compromises and adjustments, and dog shows are no different. You need to adjust and adapt to the circumstances that you are in.
4. Focus on the positive. Trials are social places. One of the wonderful things about performance dog sports is the people that we meet and the friendships that we make. Sometimes negative talk may creep into our conversations. Step away from all negative discussions. If you feel you don't have any other option but to stay and listen to someone's negative rant then you may want to try excusing yourself to walk your dog. Negative talk fuels negative energy. Trials are supposed to be fun. You choose the attitude you want to embrace—make it a positive one and that good energy will follow you into the ring.
5. Realize a dog show is an environment change for your dog. Allow your dog a few minutes to look around and acclimate to their surroundings. Let them know they can look around and then when their attention turns back to you reward them! This will make your dog more comfortable in their new surroundings. I see a lot of people come into a trial site and immediately start asking their dog for attention. I think this is difficult for a dog to do since they are walking into a situation that they haven't been in before. There are different dogs, different people. They need to be given a few minutes to look around and adjust to their surroundings. If you have done work with your dog in different environments then they are probably used to going into different areas, looking around, and then turning to you to begin working. This is the same behavior that you are looking for when you enter the trial environment. If you have done your homework then you have brought your dog into different environments so they are used to going to different places, adjusting and then getting to work. When you get to a new place you need to get your bearings. Your dog needs to be able to do the same.
6. Be familiar with the judge's heeling pattern and ring routine. Watch how long they take between dogs so you know when to be ready ringside. I usually try to go out in the parking lot and walk the heeling pattern a few times. If the environment is not conducive to this then just visualize the pattern and footwork. Run it through your head a few times so you know when your turns are and you know the footwork. Know where each exercise starts so you can take advantage of your time in the ring. This way you can focus on your dog between exercises and not the judge telling you where to go to setup next. It also helps you stay in the moment and maintain your connection with your dog.

7. Beware of negative self-talk! We all have an internal dialogue. Be sure that yours is a positive, upbeat one. Be aware of what you are thinking and keep those thoughts positive. Our thoughts portray how we feel about ourselves. Keep your internal dialogue optimistic. Send your internal saboteurs on a trip to Mars. They have no business being with you at an obedience trial! You and your dog have worked hard to get where you are so just relax and enjoy your time in the ring.
8. If something doesn't go as planned, let it go and move on. Your dog needs to always view the ring as a positive place. If a mistake is made, just move on and don't dwell on it. Our Aussies are incredibly sensitive. A harsh voice or any kind of indication that they did something wrong in the ring can destroy their confidence. Just make a note to put the exercise on the training list. Pull out the positives from each performance and know what you need to go back and train a bit more. Always have certain goals that you are trying to achieve each time you step in the ring. Remember that your goals are unique to you. There are always good things that happen at each trial. Center in on the positive things that happened.
9. Go into a trial fully prepared and knowing that you have done the work. Put your time into your training and relationship building with your dog before the trial. Take some time each day to work on your relaxation breathing and visualization so that you are able to focus and stay centered on trial day. When you have done the work you will walk into the trial environment fully confident. There will be no question in your mind that you have put in the training with your dog and you have worked on your mental game. Thorough preparation unlocks the door to success.

Keeping yourself grounded and centered through breath helps you maintain a sense of calm at trials. It also allows you to enjoy our sport so much more. Relaxing and being in the moment with your dog is what trialing and competing is all about. Try using your breath to help center you next time you compete and see if your focus and ring performance improves.

Until next time, remember that connection, play, clarity and confidence = a magnificent obedience team!

Canine Chronicle Junior Stats

(as of June 30, 2016)

1. Erin Turman	296
#1 Herding Junior	
2. Riley Lautenschlager	144
#6 Herding Junior	
3. Josie Scoonover-Nelson	106
#10 Herding Junior	
4. Sarah Stong	05
5. Michaela Matkins	95
6. Bailey Crader	70
7. Hope Anzalone	51
8. Megan Livingston	50
9. Victoria Tarr	49
10. Kaia Hrachovec	46

****Some of the Top Ten Aussie juniors are not USASA members. They cannot be rewarded by USASA for their efforts and successes if they are not members. Membership for juniors is free, and comes with many wonderful opportunities! If you know a junior that shows an Aussie, please check with them to see if they are a USASA member. Remember, juniors are the future of our sport, and helping them learn about all of the opportunities for involvement in our breed is incredibly important.**

