**"BABY "EXERCISES" FOR THE SHOW PUPPY"**

***Northwest Notes / THE LABRADOR QUARTERLY***

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Finally, the new puppy is yours to hold and play with; to watch as he develops and to look forward to his first conformation classes ! I encourage you to "shape" baby puppy using positive mini exercises when you spend time together. You can "shape" puppy into a happy, self-confident and showy youngster, or, not. These "baby exercises" will be his foundation for "real" training later, examinations by show ring judges, as well as the stand for exam novice obedience exercise. These "baby" exercises also provide lots of positive touching that babies love and need. "Touching" not only strengthens the bond you build with your puppy, but will build his self-confidence as well, especially as he is gradually handled by different people.

Your Labrador baby comes with an individual personality type that is strongly influenced by his genetic predisposition from ancestors. Both human babies and puppies come with their own little personalities that we are responsible to shape. Puppy’s self-confidence needed eventually for the show ring start with shaping his experiences. He needs to associate "good things" with the words and actions of the people closest to him those who teach him. To shape our baby, we will use love and other forms of currency.

What does your baby really like as forms of reward? Food for sure ! (We will use that also). But touching that feels good and becomes associated with people, this is a most wonderful reward to your puppy stroke down his back with fingertips that feel like gentle message. Stroke down puppy’s legs gently, along his sides and remember to include stroking the tail in a way that really feels good. Stroke just a few seconds at-a-time when very young, adding time and more detailed physical exams as he ages.

Perhaps repeat a word as you stroke,(I use "Stand"), and continue for as little as ten seconds before releasing with “OK". Only when his attitude is happy and confident during his "exam", should you gradually begin to add time to the exercise. This could become a mini "stand for exam" exercise, eventually extending 30 - 60 seconds before releasing, and yet for him this is simply part of the way you typically spend time together. I repeat "Stand, good stand" with a really positive tone of voice. Touching that feels good builds confidence between baby and handler and is important to developing his attitude toward other people as well .

Occasionally have another person stroke and "examine" puppy as your voice provides encouragement. Tone of voice is critical in making this exercise FUN. He knows from the tone of your voice that this "exercise" with you is wonderful. He should look forward to the next time he is examined. Remember, if he hears "your" word for "this exam exercise" AND is handled roughly, or by a handler who is frustrated or loosing patience, the puppy will eventually associate being stacked and examined as a real negative.

We want our future star to desire being examined and touched and enjoy this part of "showing himself". Most puppies love to eat and will readily move their little bodies into the positions we coax them, just to get that special treat we hold. The baby puppy can "learn" several words I use when free baiting in the show ring learning these words now and associated with food in a very positive way, will be there to use when he is actually in the show ring a few months from now.

You are "shaping" your puppy’s attitude and therefore plan for the times when you will use food to teach something. Take a few moments BEFORE a meal when he is hungry to get the most from using food rewards. I like to use hot dogs or pieces of similar meat because the puppy can actually bite pieces off and then becomes more assertive, instead of simply being fed pieces of food. The bait really must be something he likes and wants. Starting from any position, repeat the word "Stand" in a very positive and encouraging voice tone as you walk him forward a step or two until he is up on all fours. He should then hear, “good stand". He receives delicious treats as he simply stands there. Again, make this ten to fifteen second at first and end "the exercise" with a release like "O.K."and move slightly away from that spot. To the puppy, standing up is rewarded with food and by the sound of your voice, he hears that "standing" really makes you happy. As you extend the time on this exercise, for the puppy, receiving the food becomes intermittent and not constant. Receiving the treat also eventually becomes contingent upon wagging his tail and even having his ears up.

While working with baby puppy on standing using food, I "teach" two other phrases also eventually necessary to free baiting in the show ring, "Take a Step" and "Get Back". Begin by using the food that puppy is chewing on as a "steering wheel" to very slowly bring one front foot forward as he hears "Take a Step" repeated in an encouraging tone of voice. Don’t over use this request, but instead help him realize how happy he makes you when he moves that one foot a little. Teach him to “Get Back" two or three steps in the same way.

The food you are holding can help guide him backwards as you use your knee and body to gently move him back as well. This is easy enough for him to comply with when in the next moment, he will be rewarded again with food once he is standing properly. Your puppy can so easily be picked up and handled on a table when he is very young. As you pick him up, he "feels" you are strong, in control and also gentle. With a secure hold on puppy under his chin and under his pelvis, actually lift him off of the table a few inches and hold him there a moment before setting his feet down.

For some puppies who are especially "up", I will hold them securely in the same way yet have them standing at the very end of the table. I push them back slowly and allow their rear end to "fall" off the table, before setting them up on their feet to "stand" for a few moments. This will provide a few moments of "stillness" to move a leg or stroke him briefly before getting down and "being released". Your puppy will learn that standing quietly for short periods is not only what you expect but is also a time with you that is rewarding. This is also a time to hear positive voice tones and to be touched gently.

We are now in winter months with more time indoors, and we can use the time we simply spend having fun with our puppy to actually teach very basic words and exercises too. Begin developing your puppy’s attitude for the show ring by "teaching" him how much fun it is to simply "stand".