

THE ART OF HANDLER ETIQUETTE

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*E*tiquette. Perhaps this word conjures up images of delicately sipping out of tea cups, balancing books on one's head while gliding across the floor gracefully, and bowing or curtsying politely. But what does any of this have to do with Schutzhund?

Etiquette is defined as decorum, manners, and good form. In Schutzhund, this means we follow a code of conduct that is customary to our sport. In a day and age where entitlement and rudeness abound, good handler etiquette becomes even more important, lest these other inappropriate attitudes become the new "custom".

For this article on handler etiquette, I interviewed several of our USCA judges (many thanks to all our judges who provided information and quotes for this article!). Fortunately, our judges report seeing few instances of bad sportsmanship at trials. However, there are several little things they observe at trials that fall outside the expected conduct. Thus, as we prepare to enter a busy trial season, part of our preparations should include brushing up on our handler etiquette. Have no fear; the Eight Guidelines of Handler Etiquette are here!

8 Guidelines of Handler Etiquette

1. Know the rules, and show your dog by them.
2. Show good sportsmanship at all times, even when things don't go well.
3. If you can't say something nice, then don't say anything at all – even on social media.
4. Remember that you earn your score as a team.
5. Take pride in your team.
6. Handle your dog to the best of your ability at all times.
7. Always show respect to the judge and trial personnel.
8. Value the learning experience of the trial.

GUIDELINE 1: KNOW THE RULES

Among the judges I interviewed, "know the rules" kept popping up across the board.

"The biggest mistake is not knowing the rules or intent of the rules," commented Randall L. Hoadley.

"Be open to understanding the rules and trial etiquette," added Director of Judges Nathaniel Roque. One of the most commonly seen mistakes, he said, is that "new handlers have not clearly read the rules, or have not been practicing in a "trial" type of training."

IPO is a rule-driven sport. Each dog/handler team has their performance evaluated against these rules, rather than against the performances of other teams entered.

“The true competition is the dog and handler against the trial rules, and the best team on a given day wins,” remarked Nathaniel Roque.

It is expected that handlers have read the rule book thoroughly. If the handler has simply given the rules a glance the night before they enter the trial, they risk inadequately preparing themselves and their dogs for what they will face on the field. It shows disrespect to the sport and to the judge if a handler does not prepare and does not know the rules before trialing.

While it seems like the FCI changes IPO rules every year—requiring yet another update to our rule books—handlers should make every diligent effort to stay current. Download the rule book from the USCA website (it can be found in the “Members Only” part of the website). Review it yourself, and then review it with your club and your training director. Read over the updates our Director of Judges puts in the *Schutzhund USA* magazine. Seek out those who are more experienced in the sport, and ask them questions you have about the rules. And lastly, when you are at a trial, take advantage of the handler meetings and judge’s dinners to ask for clarification or explanation of the rules. Most judges are happy to answer these questions.

GUIDELINE 2: SHOW GOOD SPORTSMANSHIP AT ALL TIMES

This cannot be stressed enough: show good sportsmanship *at all times*, not just when you are on the field, but also when you are done with your routine and are milling around the trial grounds. IPO is a test of character for both dog and handler; our temperaments are being observed the entire trial, not only by the judge, but by everyone else at the event. How we conduct ourselves in this time of stress and adversity, as well as in times of victory, speaks volumes about our character.

“Good sportsmanship is important not only as a practice of etiquette and respect in the sport, but also because it helps teach good behavior that carries over into other aspects of life,” commented Bill Szentmiklosi. “Handlers should demonstrate good manners, know the rules, and demonstrate decorum.”

Good sportsmanship encompasses many different behaviors, such as:

- Being professional and kind toward others
- Being prepared to trial with your dog
- Dressing appropriately for the trial
- Showing respect and consideration to all competitors and the judges
- Demonstrating good team work
- Standing politely for critiques and during awards ceremonies
- Refraining from making loud, vulgar, or rude comments, even when “hidden” in the crowd
- Maintaining proper composure even if the results were not what was desired or expected
- Displaying good manners at all times

Most of us understand what good sportsmanship is: fairness, respect, ethics, sense of camaraderie or fellowship, and an enjoyment of the activity for its own sake. The difficult part is maintaining self-control and composure when things don’t go the way we planned, when our dogs do something unexpected, or when we feel we are being treated unfairly.

Nevertheless, we must always remember that this is an activity we do with our dogs because we enjoy it. It's not a life or death situation, or a 'make it or break it' moment in life. It's a sport. It's a hobby. It's a breed test. If we fail, we can try again later. The stakes are not high, not when compared to those aspects of our lives that are more important such as family, friendship, love, good health and happiness. The dog not outing after three commands or standing instead of sitting in the sit out of motion is trivial compared to a friend being hospitalized, or celebrating momentous occasions with family, or even seeing friends succeed in finally earning their titles. So we must strive to keep things in perspective, and maintain proper decorum even when things don't go as we wished.

Good sportsmanship makes IPO more enjoyable for everyone, not just the competitors. It adds to the overall positive atmosphere in the trial. Conversely, when someone displays poor sportsmanship, it adds an extra dose of tension to an already high-stress environment, and makes the trial a frustrating or even miserable experience for everyone in that person's way. Additionally, that display of poor sportsmanship reflects poorly on more than just that handler.

"It is important to remember that trials are a public event that showcase our dog's training and our sportsmanship," remarked Nathaniel Roque. "We all need to be aware that we are representing our organizations, dog breeds, and working dog sport. The trial is an event to showcase the dog and handler, and it deserves respect."

Whether experiencing victory or failure, joy or frustration, handlers should conduct themselves with grace and equanimity, or, as one judge put it: "take the perceived inequities thrust upon them at a trial (true or not) the way they would want their dog to handle a badly placed stick hit." IPO is a test of character, after all!

GUIDELINE 3: IF YOU CAN'T SAY ANTHING NICE, THEN SAY NOTHING

If you have ever watched *Bambi*, then you may remember Thumper the rabbit sheepishly repeating this line: "If you can't say something nice, don't say nothing at all." Good advice!

Our words reflect the thoughts and attitudes of our hearts, and through our words we pass these attitudes along to others. When all that comes out of someone's mouth is negative and biting, that negativity gets spread wherever the handlers speaks, and infects those who listen or even overhear it. It's like smearing dog poo on the walls: it benefits no one, befouls those who touch it, and repels everyone.

No matter what happens, don't smear dog poo on the walls. Don't gossip or badmouth anyone at the trial. Don't come off the field after your critique and then rip the judge, the group, the tracklayers, or the helper to those around you. Don't whine and complain to everyone at the trial who will listen to you.

Proper etiquette means exercising restraint, both in person and on social media. Don't fire off a negative post about the "horrible conditions", "unfair judging", "awful helper work", or any other excuse as to why you didn't do as well as you thought you should. This is still poor sportsmanship, but on a digital, permanent, and highly visible level. You also set yourself up for embarrassment should someone who is at the trial, such as a fellow competitor, club member, or even the judge call you out about your post!

"When people complain in public or on social media in a fashion which would make a non-Schutzhunder not want to join our sport, that shows poor sportsmanship," commented one judge. "If there is something

that needs to be addressed, there are avenues afforded the membership through contacting the officers of USCA, Regional Directors, or judges.”

GUIDELINE 4: YOU EARN YOUR SCORE AS A TEAM

The first part that should be emphasized here is “earn”. You *earn* your scores. We are not entitled to top points just because we show up that day and set foot on the field.

“It is the dog and handler against the 300 points available in the trial,” commented Nathaniel Roque.

It is up to the handler to execute their performance in such a way as to keep as many of those 300 points as possible. We must earn every point, especially under a correct judge who holds us to performing by the rules.

“People think the judging is getting harder. That is not correct,” said one judge. “The training and handling are getting so much better the judging has to change to keep up. If judges scored the way they did 20 years ago, there would be a 20-way tie for first place with 300 points.”

The second part that should be emphasized is “team”. You earn your score *as a team*. As the handler, you can cost your canine partner points if you mess up or don’t know the rules. You are the one leading this dance; make sure you know how to lead your dog correctly (back to the whole point of Guideline 1). However, your dog can also cost your team points. In most cases, it’s because of how we trained an exercise, or perhaps forgot to proof an exercise. There are some things that will surprise us on trial day, the “my dog has never done that before” moments, and these are the times where we must remember that we are in this together.

“Handlers forget that this is a team effort,” remarked Bill Szentmiklosi. “Some try to follow the rules and guidelines so closely that they forget to help their dogs in difficult times. Yes, this is handler help with a deduction, but the loss of these points is minor compared to no help and the team failing.”

GUIDELINE 5: TAKE PRIDE IN YOUR TEAM

The best craftsmen take great pride in their work. They complete a job to their high standards even if it takes longer than expected, because they take pride in what they create. This should be our attitude as handlers, especially on trial day. We should take pride in the hard work we did to get to this point, and in the finished product we created.

When trialing your dog, this pride should show. The dog should be clean and well-groomed, showing that you take pride in your canine partner. You should also be clean, well-groomed, and appropriately dressed, showing that you respect yourself and your efforts as a handler and trainer. The two of you together should make a well-turned out pair, showing that you are proud of the finished product and have respect for the judge, the trial, and the sport. You should be prepared to trial, rather than dragging your unprepared and undertrained canine partner into a high-stress situation that neither of you are ready to face.

Your performance with your dog not only reflects all your work, but also reflects on your club, your helper, your training director, your dog’s breeder, and all the people who helped you get to this point. When you set foot on the trial field, you represent the entire village it took to get you there.

“Be proud of your performances no matter what the success or shortcomings demonstrated,” said Bill Szentmiklosi. “Show the dog the best you can, and learn from showing and training the strengths and shortcomings.”

Bill had more wise words for handlers about trialing. “Failure by points does not mean total failure,” he remarked. “[Handlers] succeeded by showing their dog, seeing the many parts of the performance done correctly, and they experienced showing in a trial. Enjoy the moments, and enjoy something special with your dog.”

GUIDELINE 6: HANDLE YOUR DOG TO THE BEST OF YOUR ABILITY

When you are out there on the tracking field, handle your dog as best as you can. When you are out there in obedience, handle your dog as best as you can. When you are out there in protection, handle your dog as best as you can.

What about when you aren't on the field? That's right: handle your dog as best as you can. When you are preparing for the temperament test and ID check, handle your dog as best as you can. Issues start here at the check-in when handlers don't pay attention to their dogs, allowing them to be wild and disruptive to other dogs and handlers, and potentially even starting a fight because handlers missed their dog eyeballing another nearby canine. Your focus should always be on your dog, and your dog should always be under your control, regardless of whether you are checking in or out with the judge, showing your dog's tattoo or microchip, strutting your stuff together out there on the field, or hanging out waiting for your track.

“I am seeing a lot more out-of-control dogs at trials over the last 20 years of being a judge and almost 30 years of being in the sport,” commented one judge. “I would like to see more of a concern and concentration placed on good obedience.”

GUIDELINE 7: ALWAYS SHOW RESPECT

This is a pivotal part of good sportsmanship. Handlers should always show respect to the judge, the trial secretary, the helpers, the tracklayers, and the trial personnel.

“I think remembering to treat people like you want to be treated is sincerely important, not only from the judge's point of view but the handler's too,” said one judge.

Say please and thank you. Let people know their hard work is appreciated. Don't complain to other people at the trial about this very same trial in which you are entered as either a club member representing the host club, or as a guest visiting that host club.

Besides good manners, how do we show respect to the judge? Most of our judges listed similar things:

- Be prepared to trial
- Show your dog by the rules
- Dress appropriately
- Show good sportsmanship
- Check in and out properly (see sidebar)
- Thank the judge even after a disqualification or termination
- Shake hands with the judge after receiving your critique

However, two topics came up repeatedly: reporting in and out properly (so much so that I included a 'how to' guide on it! *Author's note: this guide can be found on the [Schutzhund Life website](#). Just click [here](#).) and handler behavior during the critiques.*

"Stand up for your critique; don't lay on the ground and make out with your dog," commented one judge. "It is completely disrespectful to the judge."

"Stand proudly next to your dog during critiques," another judge agreed. "Do not make faces or express dismay through poor body posture."

During the critique, the judge is addressing *you* personally. They are explaining the positive and negative details of your performance with your dog. Standing politely with your dog in a sit or down beside you allows you to focus on what the judge is telling you, and shows that you care about and respect what they have to say. Standing displays the proper respect, decorum, and sportsmanship for this sport, whereas kneeling, sitting, or laying down with your dog shows a lack of professionalism and a disrespect for the judge. And don't forget: at the end of it all, shake the judge's hand and thank them before you leave the field!

GUIDELINE 8: VALUE THE LEARNING EXPERIENCE

Every trial is a learning experience. It provides an opportunity to have our performance objectively evaluated against the standard by an outside party. It provides a snapshot in time of where we are at, how we handle the stress of the trial, and what areas need work.

"Listen to the judge's critique," urged Nathaniel Roque. "It is a tool to point out your positive and negative performance, and it is the only way to learn and improve for the next trial so you don't make the same mistakes again."

After every trial, we should leave with a better education than when we entered. It's a learning curve; through trialing you gain a better understanding of yourself, your dog, your training, and the sport.

Randall L. Hoadley had some last words of advice for handlers. "IPO is a tough sport and you better have a thick skin," he commented. "Listen to those who still compete and do well in the sport. Know the routine, practice the routine, and enjoy yourself when you show your dog."