

MEET THE DOG SHOW MENTOR

Lee WHITTIER



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lee Whittier has over three decades of experience in the world of purebred dogs as an experienced breeder, exhibitor, and internationally recognized judge. A former AKC Executive Field Representative, Lee now judges multiple Groups at prestigious shows worldwide. As the founder of the Dog Show Mentor program, she empowers owner handlers globally with strategic approaches to showing dogs. Lee currently resides in Vancouver, Washington, where she enjoys her Tibetan Terriers, gardening, and hiking. If you want more information about how to expand your dog show horizons, contact Lee@DogShowMentor.com

At Dog Show Mentor, we make winners.

An Early Beginning: Bringing Positivity Back to the Ring

Even the best of us isn't immune to occasional negativity. As the Dog Show Mentor, I witness the highest highs and lowest lows among owner handlers, as well as the ups and downs of professional handlers and judges. No matter who we are in the dog show world, we all experience those moments when things don't go our way.

Recently, I've seen how one uplifting moment, captured in a photograph, can bring us back together and remind us why we love this sport in the first place.

A PRICELESS SNAPSHOT

Not long ago, I posted a photo on social media taken by the talented Diana Han of Nor Cal Bulldogger Photography. The picture (below) shows a young girl touching her chest and smiling with sheer delight as I point to her for the win. In that instant, the energy, emotion, and excitement radiate from the girl and her dog, an image so contagious it immediately resonated with fellow dog lovers. This one moment, a simple but powerful exchange captured on camera, also led to assumptions that blossomed around it.

This photo went viral in the dog show world. My Facebook page alone generated 23 shares and over 200 comments in a matter of days. Comments ranged from:

"Precious!"

"I was her once. I know it will stick with her."

"She will never forget!"

"Impressions made. This will last a lifetime."

"What a priceless memory!"

"Wow—a career-defining moment caught on camera."

Overwhelmingly, people were moved by the scene. Many assumed it was the girl's very first big win—her "life-changing" moment. Some even reminisced about their own childhood (or adult) experiences stepping into the ring for the first time. In the face of all the negativity that can swirl around the competitive side of the dog show world, here was a picture of pure, unbridled joy that reminded everyone why we do this in the first place.

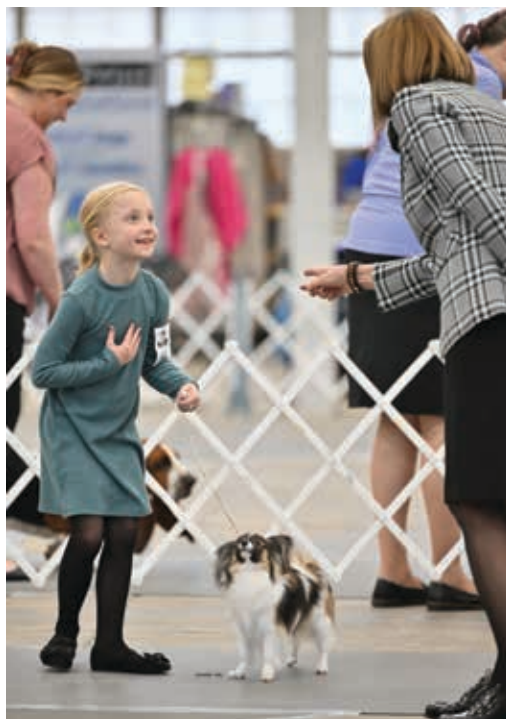


photo by Diana Han, Nor Cal Bulldogger

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UNCOVERING THE ASSUMPTIONS

Amid all this positivity, though, I noticed a common thread: commenters were making assumptions about the girl’s background and feelings. While it’s beautiful to see so much support, it’s important to acknowledge that these undoubtedly well-meaning assumptions did not match reality. People interpreted her expression as awe, nervousness, or the shock of a first significant victory.

In truth, this young girl (just eight years old) comes from a family deeply involved in agriculture and dog shows. For several years, she has been helping her family show pigs and dogs, and has already gained considerable experience. As a result, she’s not exactly new to the thrill of winning; instead, she’s used to working hard and earning accolades. She is authentically passionate about competition; her family didn’t throw her in the ring to play the “cute kid” card.

When I interviewed her mother, I asked whether all the attention from likes, loves, and shares had overwhelmed her daughter. She responded that her daughter is not just comfortable with the public’s enthusiasm but has grown accustomed to it. She graciously permitted me to write this article and shared the now-famous photo for everyone to see. So, while many assumed this was a heart-stopping first-time ring moment, it turns out that this talented young exhibitor is quite the seasoned competitor!

GRIT, GROWTH, AND JOY IN THE RING

Moments like the young girl experienced bring to mind the work of Carol Dweck on the power of mindset (and Angela Duckworth’s concept of “grit”). These theories suggest that success comes from the combination of natural talent, a desire to learn, and consistent, determined practice. This young girl clearly has talent, but she also has grit—the kind that forms when you’ve worked at something from a young age and learned to handle both triumph and disappointment.

Even though she’s used to winning, the photo captures that spark of joy experienced when we connect with our passion. Despite tough competition and occasional negativity, it’s the same spark that keeps many of us in the dog show community coming back, weekend after weekend.

WHY THESE MOMENTS MATTER

1. **They Remind Us of Our “Why.”** In the sometimes-hyper-competitive world of dog shows, it’s easy to forget our pure love for our canine partners and the thrill of teamwork. This snapshot is a reminder that, at its core, showing dogs should be fun and winning should never be an expectation. It should be earned—and spontaneous.

2. **They Unite the Community.** The outpouring of support on social media showed how an authentic, joyful moment can bring people together. Instead of focusing on what’s wrong in the ring or outside it, hundreds of people expressed excitement for a young handler’s success.

3. **They Reveal Our Assumptions.** Many of us leaped to the conclusion that this must be the girl’s first big win. Sometimes, we see others’ emotional displays as evidence of inexperience or shyness, when in reality it can be the delight of achieving a goal—even if that goal has been met many times before. Recognizing these assumptions helps us approach each other with more curiosity and empathy.

4. **They Inspire the Next Generation.** So many comments touched on how this moment brought back memories of their own first wins or near-misses. There’s power in that nostalgia, and it fuels our desire to mentor Juniors and Pee Wees so that they can develop the same passion for the sport.

FOSTERING POSITIVITY AND CURIOSITY

As a mediator by training and someone who considers myself quite sensitive to others’ feelings, one of my aims is to spread joy and open-mindedness in the dog show world. Some philosophies I foster in Dog Show Mentor are: Rather than assume, ask. Rather than judge, mentor. Encourage others to discover the “why” behind the smile or the disappointment. This approach can transform the ring into a place of mutual respect and learning, where seasoned professionals and brand-new handlers alike feel seen and supported.

CONCLUSION

The story behind that viral photo is more complex, and even more inspiring, than the assumptions hinted at. It’s a testament to how quickly dog show enthusiasts rally around a heartwarming moment and how we sometimes project our own histories and hopes onto others.

Ultimately, moments of pure joy—whether a first-time exhibitor thrilled by a surprise win or a young but seasoned handler basking in well-deserved recognition—remind us why we devote so much time and passion to this sport. The authenticity of those emotions isn’t so unlike the recent Westminster win by Monty the Giant Schnauzer, where the exuberant dog and his handler’s heartfelt reaction captured the admiration of exhibitors, spectators, and viewers on TV everywhere. By acknowledging our assumptions, celebrating each other’s progress, and nurturing the next generation of handlers, we can keep that positivity alive and well in the ring. After all, these authentic, uplifting connections truly make the dog show world shine. ■