

Hiring a Handler 101

August 17, 2016

Caroline Coile



The last time I sent a dog off with a handler I was a poor college student in the 1970s. It was \$35 a show, plus bonuses (which I had no idea were part of the deal until I got the bill). My dog kept winning Group 2 placements, which cost me an extra \$15 each. I lived in dread he would win the group, which I feared might run me \$25—or gulp—maybe even \$50! And what if he won Best in Show? I'd have to sell blood or something.

From the monthly column "Thoughts I Had Driving Home From The Dog Show" by Caroline Coile. ShowSight Magazine, August 2016 Issue. [CLICK HERE TO SUBSCRIBE.](#)



I think he went to maybe 10 shows before I decided it wasn't for me. Not only was I figuring out that at \$15 a quart (or however much blood they take from you) my dog was literally going to suck me dry if I went that route, but the phone call reporting a win just didn't have the thrill of being in the ring myself when the judge pointed. Since then I've been pretty naive when it comes to the business side of handling. I did hire a pro for a ringside pick-up a few years ago when I had two specials at a specialty; once I realized how much fees had risen I feared I'd not only have to sell blood, but a kidney, were he to win. I don't think I've ever tried so hard to beat my own dog.

(I did, and I still have all my organs.) The point is, even many experienced people don't understand the business side of hiring a handler—but they may just need to one day. So here's a quick primer on what to expect.

Every handler's rate sheet is slightly different. Many are posted on their websites, so check there first. Don't be shy about asking for clarification. Handler's rates vary from about \$75 to \$125 per all-breed show; some specialists may charge slightly more. Some handlers charge more—usually \$10 but sometimes \$25 more—for a special compared to class dog. Almost every handler charges from \$10 to \$25 more for ringside pick-ups, to make their total fee more in line with the dogs that are traveling with the handler and thus paying a portion of expenses. A few handlers charge slightly less for puppies. All charge more for specialties; if part of an all-breed show, up to twice the normal amount. If an independent specialty, maybe \$300 or more; Nationals \$250 to \$500. Special trips to show one dog, probably \$750 plus expenses. Westminster may cost from \$500 to \$1500 or more, and the AKC National Championship also in that range. Benched shows and "prestige" shows may also cost slightly more than normal shows. Sweepstakes are not included for free; expect to pay slightly less than the normal handling fee.

You may pay more if your dog wins. Some charge a small bonus (maybe \$10 or \$15) for BOB; others do not. Some charge extra (from \$10 to \$25) to take the dog into the group. Bonuses for Group One wins generally range from \$150 to \$250. After that the bonus goes down about \$25 per placement. Best in Show will cost you an extra \$500 to \$1000, with Reserve BIS half that. Many also charge extra to take a dog in a Puppy group, and expect a bonus for placing of about half the bonus for placing in a regular group. Bonuses are higher at prestige shows, with Westminster running you an extra \$2500 to \$5000. (There's a fee I'd be happy to pay!).

Almost all handlers stipulate that they keep any cash prizes.

If the handler takes the dog to the show, expect to pay a portion of the gas, motel, tolls and parking expenses split between all the dogs traveling or being shown. This generally includes dogs just going for experience. Most but not all handlers charge themselves a portion of this fee if they are also showing their own dog. Some handlers charge a flat IRS mileage, but add a fuel surcharge. If you ask to meet the handler on

the road to hand over your dog, expect to pay extra, up to \$75 per pick-up. Because we all know that 5-minute stop will morph into an hour.

If your dog lives with the handler, expect to pay board of from \$10 to \$20 a day. Expect to pay more if your dog is on a special diet, such as a raw meat diet (and also expect to supply it). There may be a fee to administer heartworm medication. Your dog will be expected to be up to date on vaccinations; some handlers require a veterinary exam at the owner's expense before accepting a dog for board. Dogs that require extensive trimming or stripping may be charged a per hour rate for preparation. Routine baths may be charged about \$25 and nail trims \$10. Day of show prep is usually included in the handling fee.

If you have a stud dog, and the handler agrees to facilitate breedings, there is usually a fee of \$75 to \$100 per breeding. Picking up a dog at the airport is at least \$100.

Understand that conflicts between class times arise, and in general dogs that live with the handler have priority over ringside pick-ups; specials over class dogs; adults over puppies; and owners who have been with the handlers the longest have priority. If the handler has a conflict and stays on another dog, your dog may go in with an assistant or another handler, and you will still pay the same fee. If the handler shows his own dogs, there will often be a clause mentioning they will use their own judgment as to which gets priority.

If you change your mind about showing, let the handler know at least two days before the closing date or you may be liable for the bill just as though your dog were shown. The handler may have turned down other clients, and budgeted expenses, with the assurance he would be showing your dog. Some handlers make exceptions for dogs in search of majors, but check first.

Some handlers require the owner to make entries; others prefer to do it themselves, but to do so, must have your billing information so they are not fronting entry money they may not get back. Some also charge a fee on top of any entry service fees to make entries.

A few handlers seem to include odd charges. One charged for water, I guess since they had to buy jugs of it for the road. Another charged for phone calls, and said all calls would be collect calls. (Really? Because cell phones have pretty much done away for long distance charges. My guess is this is really to keep clients from sucking up time on the phone.)

Payment for ringside pick-ups is due by the end of the weekend. Otherwise billing is monthly, and expected to be paid in 15 days before late fees are assessed. Most handlers require a deposit of \$500 and more often \$1000 to board and show a dog, and if that is not renewed before it runs out, they have the choice to quit showing the dog even if it's entered. If the bill remains unpaid, they may keep the dog without showing it, until the bill is paid. This will usually be stated in the contract. Some even have clauses

saying if the bill is still unpaid after 60 days, they consider the dog abandoned property and may sell it. So, pay your bill.

If you get your dog back and still owe money, don't think you can start with another handler. It's considered highly unethical for a handler to show a dog for somebody who owes another handler money.

Co-owners, as in everything to do with dogs, complicate matters. Many handlers write in their contracts they will only deal with one designated co-owner. Otherwise they get conflicting directions about which shows to attend, who is responsible for payment and who they will return the dog to.

Obviously it is to all parties' advantage for the owner to divulge any behavior problems the dog may have before sending it with a handler. If your dog rips up the handler's crate or padding or even another dog, you may be responsible for damages.

Many contracts contain a liability clause, such as the following: "Owner agrees to hold Handler harmless for any damage to the dog while in Handler's care, such as disease, theft, escape, or injury from other animals, unless such damage is caused by Handler's outright gross negligence. Owner agrees to indemnify Handler for any and all loss, damage, or liability caused by the dog while in Handler's care, custody or control. This includes but is not limited to injury inflicted by the dog on property, other animals or on persons (including Handler). Handler is not legally liable or responsible to Owner or any other person for any damage caused by the dog, regardless of circumstance. Owner agrees to indemnify Handler for any damage caused by the dog." Every contract I read mentions that the only way the handler can be held at fault is through gross negligence, which is "reckless disregard for the safety or lives of others, which is so great it appears to be a conscious violation...It is more than simple inadvertence, but just shy of being intentionally evil. If one has contracted to take care of another's property, then gross negligence is the failure to actively take the care one would of his/her own property." And another: "The omission of that care which even inattentive and thoughtless men never fail to take of their own property."

Even without gross negligence, we all know accidents can happen. Vehicles get in accidents, air conditioners go out, dogs escape, dogs get bloat that isn't detected until too late, dogs get in fights—while almost certainly not the result of legally defined gross negligence, some degree of negligence is often in play. Contrary to popular belief, a handler's main duty is to keep your dog safe. Winning may be the reason you're initially attracted to a handler, but should never upstage safety and comfort of your dog.

When I started showing, handlers were licensed by the AKC, and while some pirate handlers accepted money for showing under the table, the latter never carried big strings of dogs nor received the celebrity status of "real" handlers. Earning a license wasn't easy, and required years of apprenticeship as well as meeting certain standards in animal husbandry, housing and transportation. AKC would suspend or terminate a license for various types of misconduct, which might include losing a dog through carelessness, having unsanitary kennels, changing a dog's appearance in ways not

allowed, and so on. A suspended handler not only lost the right to show dogs for a certain period, but could not even board those dogs. I think it was in the late 1970s that AKC ultimately ceased licensing in response to inability to police handlers amidst more and larger shows, as well as lawsuits from suspended handlers claiming loss of income and prevention of trade.

Now anyone can be a handler. They may be very good at grooming and presenting a dog, and even political aspects—but they can keep your dog in a crate at home, or outside in a pen, and transport him in an unsafe vehicle, or leave him unattended all night. They can shirk making the extra effort for your dog's comfort and safety because hiring an assistant or buying a newer vehicle costs too much, toting crates into an air conditioned building or exercising dogs properly is too much work. Everybody sees the fun part of being a handler—the showing, the winning. If that was all it took I would start handling today (well, except for the part where nobody would hire me). But I will say it until I am blue in the face: it is what goes on outside of the ring that is the most important part of choosing a handler!

Professional handler organizations, such as the Professional Handlers Association (PHA), Dog Handler's Guild (DHG) and AKC's Registered Handler Program (RHP) do require their members to meet certain criteria. The PHA has been around for more than 60 years. Members are required to have shown dogs for at least 10 years, handled professionally for five, have recommendations from three PHA members and pass a kennel and vehicle inspection. The AKC's RHP has slightly different requirements: at least seven years handling for a fee; appropriate kennel facilities and vehicle; proof of care, custody and control liability insurance; current driver's license, vehicle registration and proof of insurance; and three reference letters (business, client and veterinarian).

Membership or lack of membership cannot determine whether a handler is a good choice, but if you have no other information membership is a definite asset. Of course you should have lots more information. You may have been drawn to a handler from her reputation in the ring, but it's what takes place outside of the ring that is more important. How does she treat her dogs, not only in the grooming area, but far from the ring? Where do the dogs sleep? How is the temperature monitored? Are there enough assistants to properly care for the number of dogs in her charge? Do they get outside for a reasonable period for exercise? If you don't care enough for your dog's sake, consider that if I know you know your dog is not living well, I know you care more about ribbons than your dog—and your reputation is trashed as far as I'm concerned.

How does the handler interact with other people? As your dog's representative, the handler's ethics will be considered yours. How will your dog be transported? I've been appalled to see handlers with RVs going down the road at 90 MPH. How will they be kept cool or warm in the event of a breakdown? Is the vehicle safe? Where will your dog be kept at the handler's facility? Is it suitably climate controlled for your dog? Escape proof? How will your dog be exercised? Does the handler have any education in spotting and dealing with veterinary emergencies? Every one of these considerations is

far more important than whether your dog wins a ribbon. And of course, winning is one thing no handler can promise!

Tags:

editorial

editorials

caroline coile

dog shows

news