

# IT'S NOT ABOUT SPORTSMANSHIP...

by Karen Privitello

Some of us are taking the “sport of dogs” way too seriously, and I’m ashamed to admit that sometimes I’m guilty, too. I confess that I seldom wear a smile on my face while I’m competing. Most of the time, I’m either too nervous or too intent on showing my dog(s) to best advantage to remember that a sport is “a physical activity engaged in for pleasure.” I’ve had my fill of hearing that “the judge was looking at the wrong end of the leash,” seeing obedience dogs perform mechanically with tails tucked, and viewing the suppressed anger of handlers who’s runs have gone horribly awry and I don’t want to be remembered that way. I’ve made a conscious effort to behave better.

My black smoothie liked routine and didn’t handle changes well. He was sometimes uncooperative in the ring, mixing a few brilliant performances between dozens of disasters. I used to joke that he had me on a random schedule of positive reinforcement - very random. He performed well just enough to keep me competing with him in conformation, obedience, and agility. I was often asked why such a talented dog would mess up so often and I think that the botched performances were more fun for him than the great ones. I think he enjoyed seeing which tactics I’d try to get him to work. Once he had me on my knees begging him to “Pretty please with a pound of liver on it, JUMP.” Another time he deliberately threw his shoulder into every hurdle

and then walked over the dropped rails. After we’d crossed the finish line, he bounced up and down with such glee I was forced to take a bow. Together, we raised failure to an art & entertainment form and those are the memories I cherish the most. Last year, Raider died suddenly while we were vacationing together. Those hard-won title certificates couldn’t save his life, and I’d gladly trade them, and all his ribbons and prizes for one more hour with him.

It isn’t about sportsmanship for me anymore. It’s about my dog, having fun, and relishing the moment. I’m glad I learned the lesson before my beloved Raider died: the memories are worth far more than the entry fees that generated them. ■

