

HERDING GROUP

can be taught at home.

Many of the Pembroke clubs offer herding fun days or instinct tests, though not necessarily every year. Look for the club closest to you, and check their website or contact the club secretary about upcoming events. Several clubs do offer herding tests and trials, so attend one of those if you can. You will meet lots of people and can find out who offers lessons locally. Plan to leave your dogs at home though, or at the very least, crated in your car. Your dogs may become overexcited and inadvertently interfere with the working dogs. You can also go to the AKC website and use the Events search menu to find herding events in your area. Contact the secretary for details. There may not be any corgis of either breed entered, but you will be able to find out about the club and inquire about lessons and instructors. There is also the Facebook group HerdingCorgis, where owners of both corgi breeds are welcome, and it might be a good way to find an instructor close to you.

Your instructor will gauge your dog's interest, but be prepared for your dog to work on a long line and a buckle collar. The first several lessons will most likely be short in duration and focused on getting your Pembroke interested in the livestock. You will be learning along with your dog. Keep in mind that your Pembroke will know more about the livestock

than you will!

To see some of the best herding Pembrokes in action, plan to attend this year's national specialty herding events October 2 and 3, in Denton, North Carolina. Complete details can be found at www.pwccanational.com. Just remember to bring a hat, water, a chair, and some sunscreen!

—Lynda McKee,
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Pulik

MENTAL HEALTH AND THE SHOW RING

During recent years, light is being shed on recognizing the importance of good mental health. The media especially has zeroed in on how performance-related stress can be an unrelenting challenge for Olympic athletes and other elite competitors. Athletes including Naomi Osaka, Simone Biles, and Michael Phelps have come forward with their struggles, and it seems that now, these concerns are finally really being heard and (hopefully) comprehended. As noted by Michael Phelps, we often forget that these highly talented people are human, and not machines. But do we recognize a parallel for our show/performance dogs?

Performance sports involving dogs require



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that *both* human and canine to be at the top of their game. Stress can affect your performance in two different ways. In the right amount, stress (“pregame jitters”) helps you prepare, focus, and perform at your optimal level. On the flip side, however, too much stress can cause performance anxiety, which can adversely affect your health and does not allow you to perform relaxed, confident, and focused in competition. Agility, especially, can be a challenging dog sport, as it is demanding both physically and mentally for the dog.

Additionally, the dog does all of the physical exertion while being attentive to the handler. Mental health of your agility dog is paramount, since this is a sport where critical injuries can result if the mind and body are not in sync.

When we become frustrated, angry, or stressed, our bodies release hormones (adrenaline and cortisol) that cause changes in our physiology. Our hearts race, we breathe fast and shallow, our hands might even shake, and we move less fluidly. When the person on the

HERDING GROUP

end of the leash starts get stressed, you will often hear dog show folks say that the stress travels to the other end of the leash. Dogs are very attuned to our every mood. When we get anxious near the ring, our dogs notice the difference in our behavior. If we get impatient with them in the ring in response to our own stress, dogs often start dreading going into the ring. When asked to perform, they may make an effort, but the behavior is unlikely to be of good quality. It is very difficult to concentrate and do well under those circumstances. Stress in either the human or canine side of your team can result in lackluster performance or, worse, a “meltdown” at one end of the leash or the other (or even both ends).

Signs of stress in a dog can include: averting eyes from their handler; “checking out”; avoiding their handler (or “blowing them off”); diarrhea; no eye contact; dilated pupils; excessive scratching; excessive shedding; flinching; “the zoomies”; inability/unwillingness to learn new behaviors; increased respiration; increased startle response; lip-licking; muscle tension; tucking body in close (tail under, butt tucked); scanning the environment; moving slowly; slow or no response to cues; sniffing; sweating (from the pads); yawning; barking; and spinning.

You might see one or more of these behaviors at a time, or even different signs with dif-

fering types of stressful situations. People need to take the time to learn what stress signals look like so that they can recognize them early and help their dogs before they become overly anxious.

Ring stress plagues many dog trainers/handlers and it certainly very frustrating to be in the ring with a dog who doesn't want to be there and doesn't perform like the dog you have in training. Most show dogs experience some degree of ring stress at some point in their careers, and some dogs deal with stress better than others. It's not that someone else's dog is totally stress free; instead, it is that the dog can cope with it because of training skills and great teamwork/relationship with the handler, and genetics and/or temperament also play a part. Some dogs “grow out” of their ring stress as they gain more experience and thereby, confidence.

Dogs are individuals, and while some are oblivious to the chaos of show environments, others are very sensitive souls who pick up on every nuance they feel is “strange” or “not right.” Environmental sensitivity is especially pronounced with some herding/guarding/working type breeds.

I find that the Puli is one of those breeds that is very attuned to its environment, no matter where they are. And again, some individual Puli are just better at coping with ring stress in

performance sports. It is just something that I deal with, and I work to support my canine teammate as much as possible inside and outside the ring, because this is my breed of choice as my performance sport teammate. I also try to not go into the ring with unrealistic expectations and try to find something positive about every time I go in the ring with my dog. Over time, I have worked to show my dog that a mistake need not be a stressful event, it's just something we need to work on more at training class.

Besides recognizing stress signals in your dog, it is important to understand how to manage your own stress—“mental management.” Most stress or anxiety management techniques center on breathing and visualization of positive outcomes of your time in the ring with your dog. Mindfulness or “being in the moment” is a great tool in stress management. Recognize your stress and figure out how to address it so that it does not carry over to your dog, if you are able to.

Mental management for the handler can include figuring out who to spend time with at your dog sport event. There will be people whose primary goal is a good time with their dog and camaraderie with other people who enjoy spending time with their dogs, and there will be people who are “serious” about the game (sometimes being around this serious-

ness is great for me personally, while other times I find that it stresses me out too much and sucks the fun out of going to the event).

Sometimes a handler might make the tough decision to pull out of competition and put the mental health of their dog (and themselves) first. Other times, someone might choose to battle through an issue in the ring. Remember, every dog is a different journey; just do what is right for the dog (and yourself). Stop stressing about the win, stop stressing about what other people think (don't let anyone steal your joy!), and take it as a day out with your dog. Enjoy your dog, and find the positives in what they are doing—nothing else is important.

If you can learn to better manage stress for yourself and your dog, you can achieve things you never thought possible.

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Shetland Sheepdogs

DECISIONS, DECISIONS

Breed standards are written to guide breeders in making decisions in their breeding programs: Who to breed. Who to breed to whom. Who to keep. Who to show. Who to retain for future generations. Who to sell for