

How does one find the *right* handler for their Shetland Sheepdog? First, one must consider what a handler does. A handler, defined by The Random House Dictionary of the English Language is “one who exhibits a dog in a bench show or field trial” while, the verb to “handle” is “...to manage, direct, train or control” and the noun “handling” is described as “...the manner of treating or dealing with something, management”. Actually, all these definitions can be used to describe today's dog handler.

[The American Kennel Club](#) has made several attempts to standardize the quality of a handler, the latest by adopting a system where each potential *registered handler* is interviewed, kennel and vehicle inspected, and has references checked before they are deemed “registered” with the AKC for referral to the fancy.

Groups like the [Professional Handlers Association \(PHA\)](#) and [Owner Handlers Association \(OHA\)](#) have also provided a form of screening before an individual is accepted as a member. In addition, some handlers show multiple breeds while others specialize in just one. Those handling breeds like the Poodle, Old English Sheepdog, Collie, Sheltie, and a number of toy breeds all require a high level of grooming expertise, becoming truly creative artists in the grooming and presentation of the dogs they exhibit.

Enter now the novice Sheltie owner, (ah, if anxiety were their only adversary) with their first “show dog”. Fortified by reading the breed standard, several times, they learn the rules of the game. The breeder confirms that this dog has the potential to become a champion. Wearing their heart on their sleeve, the novice ventures forth into the world of dog shows, only to quickly realize that there is so much more to the art of showing dogs than meets the eye. Having the best dog is just not always enough. So the search begins to find *the* handler; one who can emphasize their dog's virtues and claim the esteemed title of Champion.

Shelties, as a breed, have a high intellect, and as a result are more intuitive and sensitive, requiring a handler with these same gifts. Only a handler who possesses the knowledge, is willing to give the necessary time, has that special touch of the hand, and has the talent to wisely blend all of these essentials will enjoy ring victories. Sheltie handlers who truly love the breed and work tirelessly towards its continuous improvement are evident to even the untrained eye. Each handler develops a particular style, unique to him or herself. They become known by this trademark to judges and fancy alike. Like an artist's brush, a handler adds their unique,

individual strokes to the canvas, creating the picture that becomes the owners dreams of a championship title.

The relationship between client and handler is as unique as it is between handler and dog. There are a number of ways to find the *right* handler, who is perfect for you and your dog. When I first started in Shelties and looking for someone to handle my dog, I asked the typical questions, "How do I know whom to hire as a handler, and whom should I listen to when there are so many handlers with as many different opinions?" A wise and experienced handler, a member of the PHA, and a familiar winner at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club dog show, answered these questions. He replied: "Watch the ones who win. Listen to them; they have the success you seek."

So you found the perfect handler for your dog. Now what does one expect to receive when employing the services of this handler? Outside the policies of the AKC Registered Handler Program and Professional Handlers Association, groups specializing in multi-breed handling, there are no specific standards describing what a handler should offer their client. As most Sheltie handlers specialize in the one breed, they usually do not belong to either of these organizations. Their services offered are usually more personalized and varied in scope. While there are many services i.e. grooming, boarding, and training offered as an all-inclusive package by some handlers, others charge an itemized fee for the same service. More experienced handlers command a higher handling fee than a newcomer with fewer years under their tack box. It stands to reason that once skills have been honed by years of trial and error one may charge a higher fee for these more productive skills. You are paying exactly for this knowledge, experience and ability to present the dog at its best.

A client should also expect to receive a contract spelling out the services they will be receiving. No service should be assumed. To avoid misunderstandings later, the ones to work with are the handlers willing to state all their services in writing. Check their contract to see what insurance coverage there is, if any, or suggest to obtain some. Tear sheets, ribbons, and trophies are always desired by clients. It enhances the dream and keeps them informed of competitions. Some handlers keep all until the dog is returned home and then send everything in one package. Tear sheets and ribbons are sent to the owners immediately after the show; keeping the clients current. Trophies follow shortly thereafter, often hand delivered. Of course, these were practices initiated prior to the Internet, but I still prefer a hard copy of everything.

And what should a handler expect from their clients? Professional handlers work many long and hard hours to present the dogs best attributes in the ring. Like any other professional, they should be given the respect due them for their continuous efforts. In my twenty-four years of

handling Shetland Sheepdogs, one thing became abundantly clear - campaigning, conditioning and maintaining a dog for breed competition is very time consuming: seven days a week, 365 days a year. This is personal commitment at its best!

The relationship between client and handler is a special one. Misunderstandings can arise, but open communication and mutual respect resolves many conflicts. Even great handlers learn from others, yes, even their clients. As a client, single out handlers you admire and respect. Take the time to ask questions and know what you are paying for before you commit. Give your handler the trust and respect you demand for yourself. Campaigning a dog to title can be extremely expensive. Financial planning should be in order; know your budget limitations. Don't expect a handler to wait for their funds for an inordinate amount of time. Once you enlist their services, stand back and let them do their job. If you have a problem with any service, talk to your handler and let them know your concerns. Loyalty is a two-way street. If you put in the time and effort to search for the perfect handler, one specific to the needs of you and your dog, you are entitled to its rewards. So sit back, relax, enjoy the fruits of your labors and watch your handler weave their magic into your special dream.