Training for Conformation

by Lorra Miller

I wrote this for a puppy owner and thought I'd post it here too.  
  
Most training is great as it builds your relationship and communication be it herding, rally, tracking or agility. Conformation is tough in some ways if you have a shy dog but can be a fun game with cookies and toys for a happy dog. What other venue can you take cookies in the ring and play tug or give good tummy scratches while waiting your turn? Other than having some stranger look at your teeth and feel private parts it can be a really fun game. Often we get nervous and serious and then it isn't fun for either of you. But think about how many tools you can use in the ring that you can't anywhere else and think about breaking it down into fun games. It is essentially standing for a short time and trotting around the ring.   
  
When I can put time into training a puppy I used foundation agility training for stays for the stand while tossing a cookie/toy ahead, ready…steady…break! First they learn impulse control when in a down or sit and you build up distractions and then give a release word, after that is solid have them stand with a non-slip collar held at their neck like they do in conformation. Stand two seconds, ready...steady...break releasing to cookie or toy and very gradually increase to 10 and 20 seconds. No cookie/toy if they break without release word.   
  
Also gaiting towards a ‘target’ is helpful in focusing them to look ahead and not play with you or look at you adoringly. I took a couple of plastic fence stakes and strung some surveyors tape between them to look like a ring post. (Idea from Penny King for Anna the Aussie, aka Hoover because she kept diving for dropped treats). Then squirt some cheese whiz on the post or attach some treat/toy/target plate that is eye level and take them up to it and show them the treat/toy, jazz them up "wheres the cookie/ball?!" Then walk away a short distance at first and point to post with cheese and say ‘target’ or ‘lets go’ and gait to post and let him get the goodie, increase distance and soon they learn to look for a post to gait to for goodie. Also practice gaiting to your spouse, child or friend (so they gait in a straight line to 'judge') and say ‘lets go’ and have them give him a cookie when he stands (not for jumping on them). Put a toy on a chair and gait to it, anything to focus him ahead and not looking around for something fun to do. Even at a show, once they learn this at home you can find an out of the way ring post and, from outside of the ring of course, put a treat on it and give his cue word and gait to it if only a few feet just to let him know the game works in a new place too.