

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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“Challenging” the Blind

Have you ever heard this phrase? Well if you haven't heard it yet and you plan to stay in this game, you will hear it eventually.

When you start to teach your dog blind retrieves, there are lots of issues. You have to worry about good attitude leaving your side, a good initial line (where the dog goes the direction you point him for hopefully 20+yards before you have to handle), and taking casts accurately and crisply.

Once you and the dog have more confidence and are working as a team, you need to work on “challenging” the blind. Simply put, it is staying true to the straight line from the starting point to the bird. Of course, no one can have a dog that lines every blind. But what we want to do is make sure that our handling keeps the dog as tight to that line as possible. Zigzagging to the bird is not challenging the blind.

One way I do this in training is to imagine a channel between the starting point and the blind. Pick out some landmarks or changes in terrain or cover that will help you “build” that channel. Let's say on the left of your imaginary line to the blind, there is a little clump of bushes or grass that is a different color. So that makes your left boundary. Then pick something about five yards to the right of that to be the right “wall” of your channel. Then, as you run the blind, handle your dog so the dog is never outside of the channel. Don't worry about the number of casts; just worry about staying tight to the line.

When you understand this concept, set up blinds that will have natural “pulls” for the dog—things that will make the dog want to drift outside your channel. For example, running up or down hills, or diagonally across a slope will always cause the dog to drift to the downhill side. So setting up a blind across a slope will give you practice keeping your dog from drifting downhill. Dogs like to avoid deep cover, so you can use that to your training advantage also.

Remember that the rules do not say anything about the number of “handles” or whistles it takes to get the dog to the blind. It talks about the dog always making forward progress, not refusing casts, not popping, and promptly responding to other commands such as the “sit” whistle. Although some judges may count whistles, this is NOT appropriate. If you give the dog ten casts, all with prompt sits and no cast refusals, you have shown the judges that your dog knows how to handle. If you give the dog ten casts but the dog pops, refuses your casts or just goes on a romp without you, it doesn't matter how many whistles. Your dog has refused casts, popped and ignored your direction. That dog does not know how to handle (or at least chooses not to demonstrate it on that particular day).

If you make a habit of always creating a mental channel when you train on blinds, then you will be able to do that same thing at tests. I actually find it calming to establish my channel and then stick to it. I have a plan and my dog and I will work as a team to complete the plan. It also helps you keep sight of where the bird is. Sometimes under the pressure of a test, we get hung up in the handling and forget exactly where we are going. If you have a channel leading you to the blind, you have one less thing to worry about.

Remember that a dog that is out of sight is a dog out of control...at least for judging hunt tests and for training (hunting may be a different matter). If the handler loses sight of her dog, then she cannot direct the dog and the judges cannot judge the dog. So take the terrain and cover into account when you train so you will never lose sight of your dog and can correct the dog when needed. You may not have such luxury at a test because sometimes the land options are limited,

or you have judges who set up poor tests (yes, it CAN happen!). But, whenever you are training, you need to be able to see your dog to make corrections. That doesn't mean training only happens in mowed fields, but you need to think about your setup enough to make sure you and the dog don't get into trouble. I have an advantage because I have dogs at various stages of training. I can run one of the more experienced dogs on my setup and determine whether I have created a problem for the young dogs or not. If the experienced dog has trouble, it is guaranteed the less experienced dog is bound to have more trouble. Modify the setup to simplify the concept and take another shot at it.

Just remember that what a judge is looking for is a responsive dog who takes commands and casts and a handler who knows the CORRECT cast(s) to give in the particular situation. The senior level is judged with more leniency for both dog and handler. The master level is supposed to be "finished" dogs, which means a fairly clean performance. However--as always with this game--the weather, terrain and other circumstances can significantly impact how dogs work and this should be taken into account by the judges.

As with all the other "games" we play with our dogs, practice, practice, practice is the key to success. Hopefully I have given you another tool to help make your training more successful.

Happy training!

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