

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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Decoys and the Hunt Tests

Many handlers who participate in the AKC Hunt Tests are not hunters, but they want to give their dogs the chance to do what they are bred for. As non-hunters, decoys and guns may seem like unnecessary complications that are used to flunk dogs and narrow the field.

However, the purpose of the hunt test program is to evaluate the dog's ability to be a hunting companion. Therefore, all the trappings of hunting need to be represented in the tests. Unfortunately, some judges do not use decoys correctly, which can sometimes trip up an inexperienced dog.

The decoys should be placed like a hunter would put his/her decoy spread out to lure birds into shooting range. That means the decoys should be in front of the hunter (handler), where he would want birds to come in for a landing. They should NOT be sprinkled about the hunt test area out of gun range, hidden behind a point or placed to startle the dogs. But, since we have some judges who do not place the decoys appropriately, the motto "be prepared" should be followed.

Puppies or dogs new to the retrieving game should be introduced to decoys on land where the decoys are in clear view. Let the puppy or dog check the decoys out—sniff them, poke them, bark at them—so they are not startled or afraid of them. Then throw some marks so the dog must run past the decoys. Give the dog a few times to make sure the decoys are not a distraction. After the dog is running past the decoys without problems, throw a mark right in the middle of the decoys. The dog must again learn to ignore the decoys and focus on the mark. Lastly, throw some marks where the dog must run completely through the decoys.

Once your dog is running confidently through the decoys, you can start placing them in heavier cover where they may not be entirely visible to the dog. Remember that the ducks and geese have a "bird's eye" view from the air, so we want THEM to see the decoys in an area that looks like a good place to land to rest or forage.

Then you need to introduce the dog to decoys in the water. Again, you want to ease the dog into the concept. Some dogs won't miss a beat, but others will try to retrieve the decoys, which is an automatic disqualification at a hunt test. Some dogs just get totally distracted by anything floating in the water, and have to go check out each decoy. This not only loses time, but it also decreases the ability for the dog to remember the mark and complete the retrieve.

Start out with a few decoys right on the edge of the water. Throw marks so the dog must go past the decoys into the water. Then throw marks so the dog must go through the decoys in the water. Make sure the decoys are spread far enough apart where the dog's

chances of snagging the weighted line from one of the decoys is minimized. I have seen young dogs get snagged in a weight line and freak out when that “killer duck” is chasing them to shore.

Then you can place the decoys farther out in the water and closer together. Repeat the same scenarios—marks where the dog must swim past, swim into the middle of and swim through the decoys to make the retrieves.

One exposure to decoys is not enough. You should make at least a small number of decoys part of your normal training routine, so they become routine to the dog. Also remember that there are all kinds of decoys. Your dog may be fine with the realistic plastic decoys, but may not know what to think about the “sock” decoys that blow in the wind. You can simulate a sock decoy by placing a white cloth on a stick so the cloth flaps in the wind. We don’t have to be high tech here!

The key is teaching the dog to focus on the mark and ignore distractions. To make it more realistic (and like a hunt test), add a duck or goose call to the retrieving scenario. Call at the line, and have the gunner call as an “answer” to your call. The first few times, your dog will swing her head to you, but the gunner’s answering call will help pull the dog’s attention back out to the mark.

It is quite common for one of the judges to use a duck call to signal the gunners. The gunner answers the call, and then the mark is thrown. Sometimes the handler will be asked to blow a duck call. If you don’t have one, get one. The hunt test rules state that the handler may be required to use a call, and it is just good practice (and good hygiene) to have your own.

At one test, I had to sit on a bucket by my young Diva, and blow a duck call. She practically climbed up into my lap, but the answering call got her attention back on the mark and we both recovered our composure. I was a little wetter and dirtier than I had started out though! Remember if this happens to you, DO NOT touch your dog or give any commands until the judge releases you. So I endured a few face slurps until the answering call pulled Diva out of my lap and back onto the ground. She marked the bird, and made a nice retrieve. We were no worse for the experience, and had a ribbon to take home for the day’s activities. But it did show me that blowing a call STANDING next to your dog is quite different than when SITTING next to your dog. So that gave us something else to add to our training scenarios.

Although we can’t prepare for all possible situations in the field or at a hunt test, we can expose our dogs to things we know they will encounter and hope that the dog’s confidence will help her through any situations we encounter.

Happy training!

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