

## Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game  
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### Hunting versus Hunt Tests

There are many things we train for in hunt tests that are an absolute necessity in actual hunting situations. However, there are many other things that hunting can “undo” in our hunt test dogs. Here are some examples.

We work so hard on steadiness, heeling at our sides and the proper order to pick up multiple marks. When you are upland hunting, the dog can't heel with you and do its job. The dog must be out several yards in front of you “quartering.” “Quartering” means covering the ground in front of the hunter by casting back and forth in a “z” or zigzag pattern. The dog must stay within shooting distance, but cannot be under foot or in the heel position.

The dog must respond to voice or whistle commands to stay within the proper distance of the hunter, but in upland hunting, the Labrador becomes a flushing dog as well as a retriever. The dog must scent the birds, locate them and “flush” them (force them to fly) so the hunter has an opportunity to shoot the bird.

Another term you will hear is “steady to wing” which means the dog doesn't go nuts when the bird pops up and flies. The dog should hold its position (within reason) so it can mark the bird and you can send it for the retrieve. Most hunters aren't real sticklers on this point—if the dog flushes the bird, runs it down and retrieves it, the hunter is happy. And if you are hunting with more than one dog, honoring is a real challenge. Often the dogs will “steal” each other's retrieves if you don't keep on top of them.

“Steady to shot” means the dog does not take off when it hears a gun shot. The dog should stop when it hears a shot, so the hunter can direct the dog to the downed bird. This applies whether it is your dog that flushed the bird, or your hunting partner's dog. A “sit” whistle can be used to reinforce this behavior, similar to what we do on “walk ups” in hunt tests.

With pointing dogs and setters, the dogs are taught to “honor” another dog's point. This means dog number one finds a bird and strikes a point. When the second dog comes up on the first dog, the second dog should also strike a point, behind the first dog, and hold that position until the hunter has flushed and shot the bird.

When we hunt with our dogs, we don't reinforce many of the things we stress during the hunt test season. As I mentioned earlier, the dog will not be heeling while you hike through the cover. And since the main goal of hunting with a retriever is to make sure you don't leave any dead or wounded birds in the field, we aren't too particular about the dog waiting to be released on a retrieve. We do expect within reason that the dog will be steady to wing and shot and not take off over the horizon and disappear from sight.

We expect our dogs to work close to us, so we have the optimum chance of hitting the birds they flush. A dog that is ranging out beyond a few yards will be flushing birds out of shot range and will ruin a good days' hunt.

If you are going to use your retriever for duck or goose hunting, there is a different set of rules. Duck hunting is often done from a blind on the edge of the water or from a duck boat. If you are in the blind on shore, the dog must remain quiet and still—no bouncing around, climbing in your lap, whining, barking or anything that will negatively impact the hunt. The dog must sit quietly as the hunter blows the duck or goose call and must be steady to shot—you don't want the dog bursting out of the blind, after the first shot when you have a large flock of birds called in.

If you are hunting out of a boat, there are safety issues that require the dogs to be well-trained. You can't have a dog rocking the boat, jumping up on you when you have a loaded gun in your hands, or leaping out of the boat before sent. The dog must sit still and quiet and wait to be sent. The dogs must be well-conditioned to duck calls and gun shots in close quarters.

Goose hunting is often done on land in farm fields or other areas where geese come in to feed. You might have a pop-up blind (looks like a camo tent), or you might use “lay out” blinds. A “lay out” blind is a cross between a coffin and a sleeping bag. It is made out of the same material a tent is, and has a frame that allows the hunter to climb inside and lie down. The blinds are already in a camo print, but there are places for you to add vegetation that matches your hunting location—such as corn stalks, grass, etc. The blind “lid” folds down over the hunter,

leaving just a peep hole for the hunter to scan the skies. When you call the geese in, you pop up into a sitting position and take your shots.

When you are hunting with lay out blinds, the dog must also be camouflaged. They have things called "pup tents" which are little pop-up tents just big enough for a dog to enter, turn around and lie down. The dog must be taught to stay in its blind and stay still. When the hunter has successfully downed a goose or two, then the dog is given the command to retrieve. This is truly a test of the dog's steadiness and patience!! We will be attempting goose hunting out of lay out blinds this hunting season. I will report our experience at the end of hunting season.

So for those of us who hunt our dogs in addition to participating in hunt tests, spring means correcting some things we have let slide during hunting season. We may have to brush up on our walk-ups and reinforce no breaking and honoring. However, it is not insurmountable and the two activities can be done successfully with a little spring tune-up.

Happy and safe hunting!

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