

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

Stuff Happens

I recently had Diva and Ruby at their first hunt test. Diva had an interesting experience and that got me thinking about all of the funny, strange, goofy things that have happened at tests over the years. Here are a few examples.

Let's start with Diva's first test. We were running in Junior Hunter which is fairly straight forward. It is a marking test, so if your dog marks the fall, drives deep enough, establishes a hunt, retrieves the bird and delivers to hand, that's all it takes. She did a great job on the land marks, although she popped through some tall cover and slammed into a giant goose shell decoy that startled her a bit. Her first water mark was also uneventful, other than her "talking" all the way out to the bird. It was like she was muttering to herself—she couldn't swim fast enough to suit herself.

Then came the second water mark, last bird of the test. The bird went down, the judge released us and Diva leaped into the water. When she was about half-way out to the bird, a loose dog came barreling up from behind me! I tried to tackle him, but he leaped into the water and was chasing Diva down. Diva had no clue that she had company. She reached the bird, turned around to head back and the dog was right there. He lunged at her, trying to get the bird, startled her and she let go of the bird. I hit the "come in" whistle; she grabbed the duck and motored toward shore. She is a fast swimmer anyway, but I have NEVER seen her swim that fast! She was looking over her shoulder the whole time, keeping the other dog at bay. She beached a couple of body lengths ahead of the other dog, and delivered the duck. The handler of the other dog got his dog under control. Unfortunately for him, interfering with a test is an automatic disqualification. If Diva had not completed her retrieve, she would have been given a re-run because of the interference. My friends in the gallery said my attempt to tackle the dog was pretty amusing—I barely missed going head-first into the pond.

Several years ago when I was running Scarlett in Senior, we were at a test in Minnesota. They were using pheasants on land. Pheasants are very unpredictable in their flight pattern, so a live flier pheasant can be a challenge. The flier was the "go" bird of the double. The dogs that ran before Scarlett had their fliers land about 10 yards out from the gunner station, in some moderately tall grass. The gunners were behind a standard camouflage holding blind.

When Scarlett's turn came, she watched the first bird go down, and then turned her gaze to the flier station. The bird went up, was shot and dropped right behind the holding blind. I was expecting the judges to call "no bird," but instead they released me. I sent Scarlett. She ran down the hill--ran so close to the holding blind of the gun station that her side rubbed up against it--hooked behind the blind and came back with her bird. As she was coming back, one of the judges said, "We could have called a 'no bird,' but we were pretty sure she marked it." She sure did! And she nailed the memory bird and earned another SH leg for the day.

Another time we were at a Master test in Wisconsin. One of the dogs was completing a triple. It picked up the duck and headed back, but it was walking and acting funny. It took a while to figure out that the dog was carrying the duck so that the duck's wing was right across her eyes! She couldn't see where she was going. So the handler was tooting the whistle and calling her in, using voice to guide her. One problem—the dog ran right into a holding blind and bounced off like a cartoon character! When she composed herself, she readjusted the duck and made it back to her handler.

Sometimes the mud around ponds in the summer can be just like quicksand. A friend of mine was running his Chessie in a test where the first couple of feet into the pond were nasty, sticky, stinky mud. The bird they were tossing was landing on the edge of the water. His dog went out,

and looked around for a while. Then they saw her tugging and tugging. She fell backwards, composed herself and came back with only the head of the duck! The duck had sunk into the mud and all she could get hold of was the head. She tugged until it gave way and brought back what she had. The judges passed her due to the extenuating circumstances.

At another test, a dog went out to the area of the fall, started circling and barking. The dog started to come back without the bird, so the handler stopped the dog and sent it back to the mark. The same thing happened. Finally the judges and the handler walked out to the bird to see what the problem was. The bird had landed right next to an underground entrance to a yellow jacket nest. It was no wonder the dog didn't want to pick up that bird!

At one of my first Junior tests (over 20 years ago), one of the water marks was being thrown from an island. The gunner got out to the station by boat, and there was no land route to the location. A handler sent his dog across the channel. The dog beached on the island, went the 10 yards or so inland to the bird, picked up the bird and headed back to the water. On the edge of the water, the dog stopped, looked at the handler, put the bird down and proceeded to EAT IT!! The handler was frantically blowing the whistle and screaming at his dog. He couldn't get to the dog and it took a couple of minutes for the judges to tell the gunner to stop the dog. By then, the dog had eaten most of the bird. That's a quick way to get disqualified. And that is a sure sign that your force-fetch is not complete.

We were at a test where the ducks had been recycled a few too many times. A couple of the handlers complained to the judges about the condition of the birds. One judge just scoffed and said if your dog were properly force-fetched, the condition of the duck was irrelevant. Then he ran HIS dog as test dog. The dog sniffed the bird, lifted his leg on it and refused to pick it up! He finally had to admit that the ducks were too nasty and he called for fresher ducks.

If you go to tests long enough, you will see all kinds of things. There is no way to train for all possibilities. The trick is to make sure that the basics are second nature to you and your dog, so you can handle these situations when they come up. I guess that's what makes it interesting...no two tests are ever alike!

Happy Training!

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