

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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Hunt Tests versus Field Trials

For the last ten years, I have run my dogs in mostly hunt tests. However, this spring I decided to run my master hunter in some field trials. There are some distinct differences between the two programs.

The hunt test program was developed to test a dog's ability to function as a hunting companion. The tests are supposed to approximate hunting situations as much as possible, keeping in mind that each dog must see basically the same test to be judged fairly. As in a hunting situation, handlers and judges are in camouflage or other appropriated dark hunting attire. The handler is asked to carry a gun, although the handler does not shoot the gun. The dogs may be required to sit in or in front of a blind, sit in a boat or walk tractably at heel while birds are "flushed" (this is called a walk up). A handler cannot point out the gun to the dog and help the dog mark. The duck calls and other queues (like positioning your gun toward the birds) are considered sufficient to help the dog see the falls and mark the birds.

Decoys are supposed to be used as you would put out decoys spread in a real hunting situation. Just a comment here — this doesn't mean three decoys at the shore that the dog swims through or past. There should be dozens of decoys like you would have in a real hunting situation.

Duck or goose calls are used from the line and from gun station to simulate how hunters would call birds into shooting range. The distance the birds are shot (and the distance the dogs must mark and retrieve) are within 100 yards, which is a reasonable distance for a hunter to shoot at and drop a bird.

The level of difficulty and challenge increases as you move from Junior Hunter to Senior Hunter to Master Hunter. Dogs running at the Master level should be "finished" retrievers, which means they are steady, can handle crisply and can mark multiple falls.

The field trial game is different in many ways. According to AKC, "There are regular official stakes at a Retriever trial shall be Derby, Qualifying, Open All -Age, Limited All -Age, Special All -Age, Restricted All -Age, Amateur All -Age and Owner -Handler Amateur All -Age."

The Derby is for dogs between the ages of six months and two years old. It is strictly a marking test — no handling or blinds. Dogs are expected to be steady — you cannot restrain them at the line. Derby is usually doubles, but longer and tighter than what you would see in a hunt test.

The Qualifying stake is for dogs which have never won first, second, third, or fourth place or a Judges' Award of Merit in an Open All -Age, Limited All -Age or Special All -Age Stake, or won first, second, third or fourth place in an Amateur All -Age Stake, or Owner -Handler Amateur All -Age Stake, or Restricted All -Age Stake or won two first places in Qualifying Stakes at licensed or member club trials. Wow! That's a mouthful.

An Amateur All -Age stake is for any dogs (at least six months old), if handled in that stake by persons who are amateurs (not professional retriever trainers). There are guidelines for defining "amateur" and "professional" as spelled out by AKC. The other variations of Amateur stakes listed above have to do with the eligibility of the dog based on its past awards.

The Open All -Age stake has no restrictions on the handlers or the previous accomplishments of the dog.

Field Trials are competitive, not pass/fail like the hunt tests. Placements are awarded --first through fourth --then sometimes a reserve JAM (Judge's Award of Merit) and other JAMs if the judges feel they are warranted. The following points are assigned for placements:

- 1st place = 5 points
- 2nd place = 3 points
- 3rd place = 1 point
- 4th place = 1/2 point

A dog must obtain 15 points to receive the title of Field Champion (points acquired in Open or Amateur) or 15 points handled by an amateur in the Open or Amateur stakes for the title of Amateur Field Champion (the points system is complex — see the following page at www.akc.org for all of the details <http://www.akc.org/dic/events/perform/ret1.cfm?page=15>). At least five of the points for Open or Amateur titles must come from a win.

Derby dogs also receive points for placements and are listed on the "Derby List" but the points do not accumulate toward an official title. The top 10 derby dogs are highlighted each year in publications like the *Retriever Field Trial News*. Statistics are calculated on all field trial dogs, such as number of starts, number of placements, number of finishes. As you can see, field trials are a VERY competitive game!

Another contrast to the hunt tests is that the handlers and gunners wear white. Part of the reason for this is the distance of the marks (200, 300 or more yards) and the complexity of these set-ups. The handler is allowed to point out each gun station to the dog from the line before signaling for the first bird to be shot. The handler may also help "turn" the dog as each bird is shot but the handler cannot block the view of a mark from the dog or otherwise manipulate the dog.

Things like "hooking a gun" (running on the wrong side of the gun) even if the dog knows where the mark is become a major fault that could keep you from being called back to the next series. An extended hunt, even if in the area of the fall, may become a liability. Technical accuracy becomes very important because the marks are tighter and more complex.

Blinds may be several hundred yards long, sometimes up to 400 yards. This is when having the handler in white becomes a necessity to make sure that the dog sees the handler's signals.

If you told me five years ago that I would even consider running a dog in a field trial, I would have laughed at you! Master Hunter seemed delusively enough! But, this is how the game works. You start with a companion dog. Then you find out about the things you can do together — like obedience class, hunting, etc. Then you find out about the hunt tests. You and your dog earn a Junior Hunter title. Maybe with the same dog or the next dog, you try for Senior Hunter. When that is successful, you think about Master Hunter. When the Master Hunter title is under your belt, then maybe you look across the fence at the field trial game... it is a progressive addiction.

We can't all start at the top. We have to work our way through the levels of the game as dogs, time and energy permit. Getting people STARTED on the game is the lifeblood of the sport. If they start "playing," chances are they will continue playing. And then they get others involved, who get others involved... it's a vicious cycle that we willingly join. And once we join, the dogs won't let us leave!

How did my master dog do? Well, with me at the controls and not much training, we managed to make it to the second series of Amateur. Considering that the dogs we were running against were mostly professionally trained and many had already earned FC or AFC titles, I felt pretty good! However it is truly a different game. I think I will continue to focus on hunt tests.

Happy Training!

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