

FIELD AND FEATHER

The Retriever Game

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This column will be a series of articles dedicated to explaining the AKC Retriever Hunt Test program from the perspective of a participant.

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Column#2: Hunt Test Terminology

As you are training your retriever for hunt tests, you will also need to learn the language. Here are some terms and definitions you will need to know. For simplicity, I will refer to “the bird” or “birds” since birds are used at the hunt tests. However, the definitions also pertain to dummies or bumpers used during training.

Marking—One of the qualities scored by the judges. How the dog remembers where the bird (mark) lands. A dog that “marks” well will have accurate depth perception and memory to locate the bird quickly with little or no hunt.

Style—One of the qualities scored by the judges. How the dog proceeds to the mark and returns to the handler. The dog should be enthusiastic and willing to complete the task. The dog should also respond quickly and obediently to any directions from the handler.

Perseverance—One of the qualities scored by the judges. Willingness to get to the area of the fall and hunt until the bird is found and retrieved. Can also be referred to as “courage” or “hunting” abilities.

Trainability—One of the qualities scored by the judges. This is measured by obedience, control, responsiveness, steadiness and delivery.

The Line—this is the area designated by the judges for the dog and handler to approach for the test. The handler may be required to reach the line, sit the dog and signal when ready, or the handler may be told by the judges that the scoring of the event will start as the dog and handler are approaching the line (called a walk-up test).

“The line” can also be used to refer to the preferred path from the starting point to a mark or a blind retrieve. Handlers or judges may refer to “lining the dog,” which means positioning the dog by the handlers side handler’s side so it will run the direction desired toward a mark or a blind.

Line manners—Refers to the dog’s behavior and obedience while waiting to be sent. Vocalizing (barking or whining), jumping, excessive fidgeting or soiling the line are all examples of poor line manners. A dog and handler can be excused for excessive vocalizing or other detrimental behavior. A screaming dog is not a good companion in the duck blind!

Steady—Sitting by the handler’s side (or where indicated by the judge) without leaving the designated spot until the judge signals the handler and the handler releases the dog. In the Senior and Master levels, the dog must be steady without restraint (no collar, no leash, no contact with handler). You may hear or see the phrase, “steady to wing and shot,” which means the dog will sit or stand by the handler when a bird is flushed (or thrown) into the air and when shots are fired.

Mild restraint—Only allowed at the Junior level. Junior dogs may be brought to the line wearing a flat collar or a check cord and the handler may lightly hold the collar or check cord until signaled by the judge to release the dog.

Check cord—A leash or light-weight lead of some sort that is lightly looped around the dog's neck (or through the flat collar) and held by the handler. When the judge signals that the handler may release the dog, one end of the cord is dropped to let the dog go while the lead falls free of the dog and is kept by the handler.

Mark—Used to describe a retrieve that a dog sees in the air and often sees as it falls and hits the ground.

Single (or single mark)—when one bird is shot/thrown in view of the dog.

Double—when one bird is shot/thrown, the dog watches, the fall, then another bird is shot/thrown. The dog is instructed to pick up one mark, then return to the handler, deliver the bird and then the dog is sent for the second bird.

Triple—When the dog watches three birds be shot and thrown one after the other. The dog must remember where the birds landed and must pick them up in the order the handler chooses.

Deliver to hand—This is used to describe how the dog should return with the bird. The dog must carry the bird lightly (no chewing), return to the handler and hold the bird until the handler signals the dog to release the bird into the handler's hand. The release should be easy and smooth—no tug of war or repeated dropping and picking up by the dog. **IF THE DOG DROPS THE BIRD, THE DOG MUST PICK THE BIRD BACK UP AND DELIVER TO THE HANDLER.** If the handler picks the bird up from the ground, or touches the bird on the ground, the handler and dog will be disqualified. The bird must be "fit for human consumption," which means not eaten, chewed or damaged by the dog.

Area of the fall-Used to describe the place where the bird has fallen to the ground and the adjacent area around the bird. The dog should go to the area of the fall and establish a hunt to find the bird without leaving the area of the fall.

Establish a hunt—When the dog goes to the area of the fall for the bird, but does not find the bird immediately, the dog gets into the area and starts to use its nose to locate the bird. This is perfectly acceptable behavior. However if the hunt becomes too broad, so it is out of the area of fall as established by the judges, the judges may score the dog lower on perseverance or marking (remembering where the bird landed).

Creeping—This is when the dog slowly inches from the handler's side (or from the designated starting point) a few steps at a time or, by scooting or creeping along the ground as the birds are being shot/thrown, but the dog does not break. Judges will determine at what point the creeping is too far away from the handler and may ask the handler to re-heel the dog before releasing the dog for

the retrieve.

Break or breaking—This is when a dog that is being judged (either at the line or during the honor) goes for the bird before the judge has instructed the handler to release the working dog (as opposed to the honor dog). If a working dog breaks or an honoring dog breaks the breaking dog is disqualified.

Controlled break—In Junior and Senior levels, the dog may have a controlled break. If the dog leaves for the birds before being released by the handler, but the handler is able to stop the dog by whistle or voice command, the dog and handler will be allowed to finish the series. Yelling NO! is not an acceptable command for stopping the dog. Most handlers will use HEEL! or HERE! to have the dog return to the handler. Judges will also establish an acceptable distance for the controlled break to occur within. If the dog is beyond that point before the handler recalls the dog, or if the dog does not respond to the handler's commands, the dog and handler will be disqualified. Controlled breaks are not allowed at the Master level.

Honor—Dogs running at the Senior and Master levels must honor another dog's retrieve. The judges will define a spot where the honoring dog must stay, with its handler, while birds are shot for the working dog. The dog may be sitting or lying down, but the handler may not touch the dog or use any threatening voice or body language to intimidate the dog into staying. The handler may speak to the dog in low tones throughout the honor, as long as this does not interfere with the working dog and its handler.

Recast—When a dog makes a start toward a marked fall, but stops within a short distance (usually 15 feet) and returns to—or is called back by—its handler. The dog is then sent again to retrieve the mark. This is allowed at the Junior or Senior level if the recast seems to be due to confusion by the dog as to whether it was actually released to retrieve or not.

Switching—This is when the dog has gone to the area of one fall and has established a hunt, but then leaves that area and goes to the area of another fall. This can happen on a multiple retrieve (double, triple, etc.) or can happen if a dog has retrieved one single, is sent for a second single but after establishing a hunt, returns to where the first single was retrieved. This is a disqualification.

Blinking—When a dog goes to the area of the fall, finds the mark, but refuses to pick it up.

Blind—Used to describe a bird that is on the ground, but the dog did not see it in the air or where it landed. However, the handler and the judges know where the bird is. The dog "runs a blind" when the dog is sent by the handler and is guided by hand signals and whistle commands to where the bird is. The dog then retrieves the bird to the handler.

Blind or Holding blind—Used to describe a structure usually made out of camouflage materials. It can be used to keep the dog from seeing the test as the dog progresses to the line, or it can be used as a hunting blind would be, with the handler behind the blind and the dog on the outside of the blind so the dog can see the marks.

Popping—When a dog is sent for a mark or a blind, runs part of the way, but then turns, and sits or stands, looking at its handler for instruction. This can be considered a lack of perseverance or

trainability and will be scored accordingly. In Master, popping is a disqualification.

Diversion—Can refer to a “dry pop” which is a blank shotgun blast that is not associated with a mark or blind retrieve. Or, there can be a “diversion bird” thrown. This is when the dog has seen a multiple mark thrown (double, triple, etc.) and has been sent to retrieve at least one of the marks. As the dog is returning to the handler, another bird is thrown and a shot fired. The dog now has another bird to remember and retrieve as well as completing the multiple marks.

Walk-up—This is when the handler and dog must walk from one designated area to another with the dog at heel, while the marks are being thrown and shot. the dog must stay under control and steady until the handler has been told to send the dog for the retrieve. This is used at the Senior and Master level tests and helps the judges determine trainability and control of the dog.

Okay! Now you are familiar with the terms of the game. Next time we will talk about preparing for Junior Hunter level tests and what to expect.

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