

FIELD AND FEATHER  
*The Retriever Game*  
by Meredith Kuhn  
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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.*

### **Getting ready for your first Hunt test**

We have talked about the philosophy behind the AKC hunt test program and the terminology you need to be familiar with to understand what is expected. Now let's talk about getting your dog ready for its first Junior test. Let's look at this from two scenarios: preparing an older dog that already has a CD or above in the obedience ring and then next time we will discuss preparing a new puppy for field work.

#### Preparing an older dog

The first dog I ran in Junior Hunter earned her CD at 13 months old. She was an excellent obedience dog—eager to please and fun to train. She was well over two years old before I found out about the hunt tests. According to some standards, she was pretty old to start training for field work—in fact I was told to get a puppy and start from scratch! However, she had a strong natural desire to retrieve. That, coupled with her eagerness to please, was enough to make me want to try. Here are some things I learned that you may find helpful.

Work on the basics. Culture your dog's natural retrieving desire. If you have a dog with a CD, you will want to consider going through a force-fetch program to help prepare. If you have a dog that you have already been working at the CDX level, then you have a dog that has probably been force-fetched, will be steady for a dumbbell toss, will retrieve on the flat and will deliver to hand. You have a pretty good foundation, but you need to expand the dog's world a bit.

First, you need to introduce gun shot. To make sure the dog does not become startled or "gun shy," you need to have someone help you with this exercise. The best way is to have someone with a training pistol stationed about 75 yards away from you and the dog. A training pistol or "starter's pistol" is a pistol that takes 22 caliber blank bullets. The pistols made for shooting blanks do not even have a hollow barrel, so the bullet is not ejected from the gun. It is strictly a noise-making device. However, it is still a gun and should be handled with the utmost care! The gunner should be versed in how to load and unload the gun as well as basic gun safety. You can do the same exercise with a shotgun and blank shells, but again, make sure your gunner is knowledgeable about firearms. And remember your ear protection! I use the foam earplugs. I keep several pairs in my training bag at all times.

While you are tossing a dummy or doing some other activity that the dog likes, have your helper at the 75-yard distance shoot the pistol into the air. If the dog either ignores the shot or is undisturbed by it—looks, then turns back to the activity, or has no reaction—have your friend move a little closer toward you and the dog. Repeat the process, moving a little closer each time, until you are sure there is no problem with the noise of the gun. If the dog does react negatively as the gunner gets closer,

stop at that distance. Make sure the dog has a positive experience associated with the gun shot (retrieving or some other pleasurable activity) and continue the lessons over several days until you are sure there is no aversion to the gun shot.

Then you can start to combine the toss of the dummy with the gun shot. Make sure you do this part in an area with no cover and at a distance you know the dog can see the dummy when it lands. It could be a mowed lawn, a closely mowed pasture or a parking lot. Have your gunner shout to get the dog's attention ("HEY, HEY, HEY!"). Once the dog is focusing on the gunner instead of you, have the gunner shoot the pistol and toss the training dummy. The gunner may need to have a second dummy ready in case the dog loses momentum on its way to the dummy or becomes distracted by the gunner. Tossing a second dummy will get the dog's attention back on the retrieve. It is important that the dog be successful.

Once you have determined that the noise of the gun is not a problem and your dog is retrieving the dummy thrown by your gunner, then you can start to lengthen out the retrieves. Again, you want to make sure that the dog will have success in finding the dummy when it gets into the area of the fall. That is why short cover and a very visible dummy (white on grass or dark surface) are extremely important. You can even "salt" the area of the fall by placing several dummies in the area before the "shot" dummy is thrown. That way, as long as the dog drives deep enough into the area of the fall, the dog will find a dummy and be able to complete the retrieve. As your dog's confidence and success rate increase, you will no longer need to help the dog into the area.

Okay, now we need to introduce different surfaces and some cover. It is important that the dog learn to run from one surface, across a visual barrier and continue to the area of the fall. For example, the dog needs to learn to run from grass, across a bare patch of ground back onto grass to get to the retrieve. The obstacle may be a patch of thicker or taller grass, darker grass, lighter grass, cattails, a small stream or ditch. Some dogs have no problem with this concept, while others will stop dead in their tracks when there is a ground cover change. It is better to train for this and learn your dog's reaction BEFORE your first hunt test! Remember that as you introduce each new concept, you need to help ensure the dog is successful in completing the retrieve.

You also need to incorporate other things into your training sessions, like using a duck call and teaching your dog to approach and sit behind a holding blind. Since the Hunt tests are supposed to approximate actual hunting scenarios, duck calls can be used by the judge behind you at the line, by the gunners or both. Your dog needs to learn that a duck call out in the field helps locate the bird, while a duck call beside or behind you should not be a distraction.

And of course, you need to introduce your dog to birds. Some dogs will love birds from the start and will have no hesitation in picking one up. Some will pick it up but won't release it because it is such a prize. Some will hesitate and may need some coaxing. Some will try to eat it. This is where it helps to know someone who trains regularly and has access to birds, or for you to belong to a retrieving club that has resources.

Start with a dead pigeon—a pigeon is small and easy for the dog to pick up and hold. Then you will eventually want to introduce your dog to larger birds, like ducks or pheasants. Most tests I have attended use ducks, so you need to make sure your dog's first duck isn't at his first test. You also need to take into account that the bird your dog has to retrieve may not be dead. It may be just

winged or wounded, which can be a common occurrence during hunting. It is important that a good retriever pick a winged bird up quickly, hold it securely but not tightly (no “hard mouth” which is crunching or crushing the bird) and deliver it to you without losing it along the way. The purpose of a retriever is to make sure you find and secure all the downed game so wounded birds are not left in the field or marsh. For those of you who are not hunters, this may seem a bit unpleasant, but this is what retrievers are bred for! Retrievers were bred to help bring food to the table.

When I headed to my first hunt test, my dog had never refused a retrieve—dummy or dead bird. My first set of marks was two singles across a deep ditch with a little trickle of water in it. The first mark was a control bird, which means it was a dead duck thrown as a shotgun popper (blank shot) was fired. She headed across the ditch and straight toward the mark, no problem. Back and ready for the second bird, which was a live flier. This is a live duck that is thrown and shot. I released her and she ran directly to the duck. As she opened her mouth and reached to pick up the duck, the duck exploded with wings flapping and quacking! My dog was sure that there must be something else out there to pick up which wasn't so noisy—she hunted and hunted and I finally had to call her in. That was when I realized she needed to be taught how to pick up and hold a live bird, as well as dead birds. Back to the drawing board before our next test.

Something else you need to introduce during training is decoys. Decoys are used in duck and goose hunting, so they are fair game in hunt tests. Start by placing some decoys on the grass, in plain sight of your dog. Toss the bumper near the decoys, then in the middle of the decoys, then on the other side of the decoys so the dog has to run through the decoys to make the retrieve. Once the dog has gotten used to these plastic birds (and hopefully doesn't try to retrieve one!), place the decoys out in the field on the way to a longer mark, where the dog will not see the decoys until very near the mark. The dog must learn not to be distracted from the retrieve.

Once you feel your dog performs successfully around decoys on land, you need to do the same thing on water. Place the decoys along the shore on the way to the mark, then off-shore, between the line and the mark so the dog must swim through them. Remember that very few retrieves at tests (or in actual hunting situations) will be in clear, open water. Dogs need to go through mud, muck, decoys, reeds and other natural obstacles to make the retrieve.

Many times, duck hunting will involve a boat so don't be surprised if you are required to step into a boat with your dog before making a retrieve. At the Junior level, the boat would most likely be on solid ground on the edge of the water. You will enter the boat with your dog, and have the dog sit next to you until released to retrieve. Find a friend or acquaintance who has a flat-bottomed boat you can practice getting in and out of. Place the boat on solid ground. At first, just have the dog on-leash follow you into the boat, and then right out the other side. Then work on sitting on the bench while the dog sits next to you on the floor of the boat. Then have someone toss a dummy for you so the dog can practice getting out of the boat to make a retrieve on land. Then position the boat on the edge of a pond or other body of water and have the dog exit the boat to make a water retrieve. As your dog is coming back with the water retrieve, get out of the boat and accept the dummy on land so the dog doesn't have to worry about how to get out of the water and back into the boat without dropping the dummy. Eventually, you can practice having the dog get back in the boat from the water.

Remember that as you train, praise is good, but excessive praise is not a good habit for field work.

Even in Junior tests, the handler cannot touch the dog from the beginning of judging until the judges dismiss you from the line. Not even an ear scratch is allowed. You come to the line, use mild restraint like a check cord if needed, release the dog when signaled and complete the retrieve. When the judge excuses you from the line, you may place your dog back on leash. If the judges have set up two of the required marks back to back where you will complete one retrieve, then walk to a second starting line for the next retrieve, you can place the dog on leash between the two lines. But other than that, no physical contact with your dog is allowed until the judges say you are excused. If you have used a lot of praise and physical contact in your obedience training, you need to be conscious of this when you train in the field. Your dog needs to learn that the absence of excessive praise is not a punishment.

Well, now you have a dog that retrieves birds, is learning about cover changes, duck calls, decoys, gunners and field work. Now all you have to do is train, train, train in as many different locations or situations as you can find. Have friends help you practice the actual test routine: Have someone announce “Dog to the line!” like the marshal will call as you move into position. Have someone stand a few feet behind you and say “Dog” or a number (which would be your running number) as the judge’s queue to release your dog. Use holding blinds.

When you think you are ready, find a hunt test close by and go watch. Maybe you will be lucky enough to have a friend or club member who is running a dog so you have someone to watch and question. If you feel you and your dog are ready, then it’s time to enter your first test! Just remember to be sure you are familiar with the rules and requirements. It is not fair to be angry at the judge or your dog because you didn’t know what to expect. And remember—this is supposed to be FUN!

Next time: preparing a puppy for field work.

