

# Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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## What is Style?

The retriever club I belong to, Mid-Iowa Retriever Club, just had its fourth annual sanctioned AKC hunt test. I realized that we have many newcomers, which is wonderful, but I also noticed that their expectations are not always realistic.

Somewhere along the line people are being told that as long as the dog brings the birds back, the dog will pass. Not necessarily! Remember that in the dogs are judged on four main categories: Marking, Perseverance, Style and Trainability. Lack of one or more of these will result in a dog not passing a test. It is extremely important to review the AKC publication "Regulations and Guidelines for AKC Hunting Tests for Retrievers" to make sure that you understand what is expected of you and your dog. This is a free publication available from AKC. All clubs running sanctioned and licensed AKC Hunting Tests should also have copies of this booklet available to members. This simple step could help many people avoid a disappointing situation.

Marking is pretty straightforward — the dog must remember the area of the fall, go directly to the area, establish a hunt and retrieve the bird. However, some people believe that if the dog retrieves the bird without handling assistance, they should still pass on marking. But if the dog hunts all over the place, goes out of area, wanders all over the place and eventually trips over the bird, this is NOT marking.

Perseverance has a bit of a subjective element to it, but the dog must get into the area of the fall and establish a reasonable hunt until it retrieves the bird. A dog that leaves the area, gets distracted by other smells or activities, has to "water" all the bushes, or gives up on a hunt prematurely does not exhibit good perseverance.

Trainability has some basic elements. The dog should heel tractably at the handler's side throughout the exercises, including walk ups. This does NOT mean bouncing with its front feet off the ground, whining, rushing ahead of the handler, excessive creeping or breaking. Some people misinterpret a dog that walks on its hind legs, whines or creeps as a dog with lots of desire. This is a dog lacking training and/or trainability. If you cannot control the dog, the dog will not be a good retriever and hunting companion. Imagine a dog howling in a duck blind as the birds approach, or a dog that pops out of the boat before told to leave. You will not have a successful duck hunt with a dog like that! A upland dog must quarter and stay within shooting range of the handler. A dog that rushes ahead and flushes birds out of shooting range is not a good hunting companion.

The category people seem to have the most trouble with is *style*. This is very subjective, but there are some basic things to keep in mind. A dog that **does not want to be there** is a dog that will have no style. The dog will plod through the retrieves and show no interest or enthusiasm. Just because the dog brings back all the birds does not mean that the dog will not automatically pass.

Several years ago, I was running a senior test. The first series was a water double with a blind. The water was a shallow, mucky farm pond surrounded with cattails and curious cows. It was what is termed "running water" which means it is too shallow to swim so the dogs run through it. I watched one dog that performed all the tasks but the dog did not pass. Why? Well, when other dogs trotted or ran through the standing water, this dog walked in slow motion, picking its way through the mud. When the handler gave whistle commands, the dog turned like it was a slow motion robot, and then slowly took the cast — the correct cast, but everything was in slow motion with no wagging tail or any sense of enthusiasm. I heard the owners after call backs (when the marshal tells the handlers which dog has passed that series) frustrated why the dog did not pass. They kept saying "But he got all the birds!" Yes, he got all the birds, but he didn't want to be there. **He had no style.**

The first dog I ran in hunt tests was my BJ. BJ doesn't do anything in high gear, but she still shows enthusiasm. She is very deliberate in her marking and retrieves, but she has a springy trot and a happy tail. She proudly presents each bird to me and is ready to go again. No, she isn't flashy and fast, but she does want to be there and she does want to work. Even at age 13, she still lights up when I throw her a bumper or a bird. Her trot is a little slower but her tail is still happy.

At the junior level, marking is the top priority, but I have seen many junior judges give too much leeway on this. They let the dogs have huge hunts, running all over the place before returning with the bird. Although at the junior level we are dealing with inexperienced dogs (not necessarily young dogs), we — as judges and handlers — still need to establish some standards for quality of work. If a person's dog passes at the junior level with poor marking and big hunts, then that person may think that same level of "marking" is acceptable at the senior level or master level. Style should still play a part at the junior level. The dog should be interested in the task, but not out of control. The dog should go briskly to the area of the fall, establish a hunt and return to the handler without any side trips. The dog should have its tail up and be happy to work with its handler.

When you get to the senior level, the dog and the handlers should be more experienced, and therefore, should be held to a higher standard. Large hunts are inappropriate except for extenuating circumstances (extremely heavy cover, a cripple that is on the move, etc.). Style should be apparent. The dog should want to be there and want to do the work. You can have a dog with flawless mechanics but no style, like the dog I mentioned earlier. The dog took straight lines to the marks and never refused a cast, but it hesitated in picking up the birds, plodded through everything with its tail down and had a look on his face that said, "I'd rather be on the couch!" That is an example of no style.

At the master level, the dog is supposed to be a "finished retriever." This means the dog is a "no-slip" retriever (doesn't break), the dog can successfully mark multiple retrieves and works as a team with its handler. The handling should be crisp and clean. Style with multiple marks means enthusiasm throughout the exercise — returning from each bird ready to retrieve the next. It means tail up, willingness to work and responsiveness to its handler.

Style doesn't mean a dog has to perform everything at break-neck speed and with pinpoint accuracy, but it does mean that the dog should be happy to be there and happy to work. A dog with style is a dog that you enjoy watching — a dog that you would like to own.

Note every dog loves retrieving, just like not every dog loves obedience work. Forcing a dog to complete a task that it doesn't want to do becomes unpleasant for the dog, the handler and the judges. If the dog you have doesn't enjoy retrieving or being handled, then field work isn't the right "game" for you to play. If your dog **does** enjoy retrieving, then take advantage of that interest and go as far as the woof you can in the game. But do your homework first. Be sure you understand the rules and regulations and what is expected of you and your dog. Then you, the dog and the judges will all have a good time!

Happy Training!

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