

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.

Like many people, I started with a pet that I took through obedience classes. Then I found out about obedience titles and began training for and competing in obedience. There's nothing quite like the thrill of the teamwork between dog and owner in the obedience ring—the dog intently watching its owner for each new command or move and the owner executing the commands per instructions from the judge.

However, with obedience, there is what I call the “mental leash” even with the off-lead exercises. You are in a small ring, with a path clearly defined by the rubber mats. The dog and handler are always working within fairly close proximity (with the exception of long sits and downs in Open and Utility) and the dog and handler have a set routine that is followed. *You know what is coming next.*

The Retriever Hunt Tests adds some new dimensions to teamwork that become great training challenges—having your dog perform at distances of up to 100 yards and the unpredictability of the field. At first, these differences may seem insurmountable, but with a little guidance and a willing dog as a partner, the Retriever Hunt Tests can bring a lot of fun and satisfaction!

The AKC Retriever Hunt Tests are open to Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers, Curly-Coated Retrievers, Flat Coated Retrievers, Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, Irish Water Spaniels and Standard Poodles. The dogs can be intact, spayed or neutered. Dogs of an AKC registrable retriever breed with Indefinite Listing Privileges (ILP) numbers can also participate. Dogs must be at least six months old on the day of the event.

According to the AKC, “The purpose of a Hunting Test for Retrievers is to test the merits of and evaluate the abilities of Retrievers in the field in order to determine their suitability and ability as hunting companions. Hunting Tests must, therefore, simulate as nearly as possible the conditions met in a true hunting situation. Dogs are expected to retrieve any type of game bird under all conditions and the Judges and the Hunting Test committee have complete control over the mechanics and requirements of each test.” Yes, your dog must learn to retrieve BIRDS instead of dumbbells or articles. Trust me—they really **like** it!

There are three levels of titles in this program: Junior Hunter (requiring four qualifying scores), Senior Hunter (four qualifying scores if you have earned JH, five if you skip JH) and Master Hunter (five with SH, six if you skip SH). Unlike obedience, you do not have to achieve the previous level title to enter and title in the higher levels. You can even go straight to Master Hunter if you and your retrieving partner are ready.

There are certain things you need to know and terminology you need to be familiar with before you enter your first Hunt Test.

First, make sure you have a current copy of the AKC publication “Regulations & Guidelines for AKC Hunting Tests for Retrievers” and that you read it to familiarize yourself with the rules, requirements and field etiquette. You may not understand all the terminology and rules at the beginning, but **read it anyway!** This booklet is available from AKC at no charge and it is also available on-line from AKC’s web page, www.akc.org under “Performance Events.” I make sure I have the current version and I often refer to it throughout the year to refresh my memory or clarify a requirement.

Second, try to find someone else who is interested in the Hunt Tests, and hopefully has already participated in (and titled a dog in) one of the levels of Hunt Tests. It always helps to have a training partner and if you can find a more seasoned Hunt Test participant to mentor you, all the better. Someone who has trained for and participated in these events can help you understand the requirements and the terminology. Your dog also needs to get used to seeing someone standing out in the field. Having the dog retrieve objects tossed by the handler is no longer sufficient—the dog must learn that birds come from the field and from someone other than the handler.

Third, if you have the opportunity to attend a hunt test as just an observer, do it! You will be surprised what you can learn just by watching, listening and questioning. Don’t be afraid to ask questions! Even when you attend your first Hunt Test, other participants, the judges and the marshal (like the steward in obedience) will be glad to answer questions as long as you are not interfering in the event process.

Fourth, basic obedience training is a must! Although some people who train for retriever field events may not teach all the same commands, you cannot have a successful field dog without control and manners. People training specifically for retriever field events may not teach the “down” (or “drop”) command, “stay” or “stand.” However if your dog knows and understands these commands it will not hinder your work in the field. The one thing that your dog will have to learn is that you are no longer the main focus—the bird in the field is! Some obedience dogs that always maintain eye contact with the handler may have a hard time learning to look out in the field at first. However, any self-respecting dog with “retriever” in its name will quickly learn the rewards of watching out in the field instead of watching the handler!

Fifth, remember that this is a program judging the dog’s merits as a retriever hunting companion. You are not judged against the performance of the other dogs and handlers—you are judged on the standard and requirements of the test level and how well you have met these requirements. Unlike obedience, there are two judges. They evaluate each dog and handler according to the guidelines and standards of the AKC regulations, then they compare scores and determine those who qualify and those who do not. Because there are so many variables in the field—wind, a rabbit or deer darting across the field, changing weather conditions, among others—each event is unique although the basic requirements remain constant.

The Hunt Tests are a new training challenge for dog and handler that allow you to test and stretch the abilities of both. Since the events are non-competitive, I have found the participants to be a friendly, fun group. Often you see the same people over and over again and you get to forge new friendships with people from all walks of life—all because we love our dogs and enjoy culturing that amazing retrieving instinct and the wonderful human-dog bond.

Next time: Definitions of field terminology and how the “game” is played.