

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.

The Big Leap from Junior Hunter to Senior Hunter

Once you have made it through Junior Hunter and discovered that you and your dog really enjoy the retrieving game, you start eyeing Senior Hunter. The requirements and skill level for Senior Hunter are substantially more than Junior Hunter--it is comparable to the leap from CD to CDX. Both the dog and the handler need more skills, which takes more training and probably the help of someone who has already made that leap.

In Junior, you and your dog must successfully complete two land retrieves not to exceed 100 yards, deliver to hand and be generally under control. The dog must also complete two water retrieves of not more than 100 yards with the same standards. You can use a mild restraint on the dog while waiting for the birds to go down and for the judge to release you. The Junior judges will be fairly lenient and patient when it comes to young or inexperienced dogs, but the dog must still deliver the bird to hand and be fairly efficient in getting to the downed bird and getting it back to the handler.

In Senior, the dog must be under much more control and the skills of the handler come into play at a higher level. The dog is now required to be steady off-leash, complete a land double, a water double, a land blind, a water blind and an honor. The marks and the blinds are not to exceed 100 yards in length and the blinds must be outside the marks (the bird for the blind retrieve cannot be placed between the falls of the marks). A walk-up is also required for at least one of the scenarios. Let's look at each of these requirements.

Steady--the dog and handler must maintain control, either in the sitting heel position or heeling off-leash at the handler's side as required during a walk-up. It is also possible that the judges may require you to place the dog in a sit-stay outside a blind, while the handler is in the blind. Once the judge releases you, you can either release the dog from inside the blind, or often the judges will let you walk around to the dog's side to send the dog. The dog must be under control for the doubles, which means the dog must watch two birds shot with a short interval in between. Then when released by the judge, the handler sends the dog for one bird, the dog retrieves the bird and returns to the handler, releases the bird and then the dog is sent for the second bird. The judge releases you for the first retrieve, but you send the dog for the second retrieve when you are ready, without waiting for a second release from the judge. In most circumstances, the dog will retrieve the last bird down, then the first bird (the reverse order they were shot). If a dog establishes a hunt in the area of the fall for one bird, then leaves that area of the fall and goes to the area of the fall for the second bird, this is called switching and is a disqualification. Remember that the marks are supposed to be a "marking" test, which means you are testing the dog's ability to remember where the birds went down and retrieve them with little or no assistance.

Controlled break--a controlled break is allowed at the senior level. This means the dog breaks (goes before being released), but the handler is able to stop the dog and have the dog return to the heel position before the dog is more than a few yards in front of the

designated line. Judges should define the distance they consider acceptable for the dog to travel before the handler gets the dog back under control.

Creeping--remember that creeping is when the dog inches forward from the designated line, trying to get closer to the birds being shot. Some creeping is allowed, but again the judges need to establish a tolerance zone so handlers know when the dog has crept too far. If the dog creeps beyond the zone established by the judges, the judges will ask you to re-heel your dog before sending it for the retrieve.

Land blind--this is when the handler knows where the downed bird is, but the dog does not. The handler directs the dog to the bird by establishing an initial line for the dog and using whistle and hand signals to keep the dog on track to the bird. This may be a foreign concept and definitely one where it will help to watch another handler with a trained dog so you can understand the concept. It will also be helpful to have someone walk you through the steps to teaching a dog hand signals. There are also several good books out, but nothing can replace watching a skilled handler and dog.

Water double--this is the same concept as the land double. The dog must be under control while two birds are shot and land either in the water, or in a location where the dog must swim to make the retrieve (on the bank or on an island for instance). The same basics apply--dog must be under control, the dog must get to the area of the fall and find the bird, return to the handler, release the bird into the handler's hand and then be sent for the second bird. In most instances, a dog that runs the bank of the water to retrieve the bird will be scored lower than a dog that takes a direct line to the bird through the water. The judges should explain what is expected for each scenario.

Water blind--Handler knows where the bird is and uses the initial line, whistle and hand signals to direct the dog to the bird.

Diversion shot and diversion bird--A diversion shot is when a dry pop is used to test the dog's trainability and focus. A dry pop is a blank shell that is shot to make noise but doesn't have any pellets in it. This can be shot before the dog runs a blind, or as the dog is returning from retrieving a bird. The purpose is to test whether the dog will continue on its current mission. For example, if the dog is returning with a bird and a diversion shot goes off, the dog may stop and look, but the dog should not drop its bird, or change its course of direction.

A diversion bird is when the shot is accompanied by another bird being thrown. For example, the dog and handler watch a double being shot. The dog is sent for the first bird and then half-way back to the handler with the bird, another bird is shot and lands where the dog should be able to see it. The handler must be able to have the dog complete the current retrieve without the dog "switching" birds. Switching is when the dog drops the bird it is carrying and goes to the diversion bird instead. Switching is a disqualification. When a diversion bird is shot, the handler can either have the dog complete the original double and then pick up the diversion, or the dog can be sent to pick up the diversion, return with it, then be sent for the second bird of the double retrieve. Confused? The best way to understand some of these concepts is to watch a few Senior tests and ask questions.

Honoring--a dog running at the senior level is also required to honor another dog's retrieve. This is when the dog and handler must watch as birds are shot for another participant. The dog running the mark is released by the judge, then the honoring dog is released. If the honoring dog breaks at any time during the honor, the honoring dog is disqualified. If the honoring dog's break interferes with the "working" dog (the dog being judged on the retrieve), then the working dog will be allowed a re-run.

See what I mean? There is a big leap between the Junior Hunter requirements and the Senior Hunter requirements. You have to continue to culture your dog's natural retrieving instinct, but you now have to work as a team to handle more complicated scenarios. When I had my first Junior dog, Senior seemed to be an unattainable goal, but with proper direction/assistance and lots of training time, you and your dog can make it and have fun getting there.

The good news is that the leap from Senior to Master is much smaller than the leap from Junior to Senior! Once you have a good foundation of the skills for the Senior level, Master will seem within your reach.

Happy training!

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