

Field and Feather The Retrieving Game

'2001, Meredith Kuhn

Things to keep in mind

As I have started running hunt tests this spring, several things have occurred to me. Between my own lapses and watching those of other handlers, I have noticed that there are a few things we need to keep in mind as we head to the line. Many times it is handler error or lack of knowledge of the regulations that drops a dog and handler rather than the dog's performance.

If you don't have a copy of the current "Regulations and Guidelines for AKC Hunting Tests for Retrievers" effective September 1, 2000, GET IT and READ IT. Some things have changed.

Remember that it is against AKC hunt test and field trial regulations for anyone to train on the test grounds 24 hours before a licensed event. Why? Well, say a group is training with duck on ground that could be used for the test the next day. The ground has been contaminated by the duck scent that could cause dogs difficulty during the licensed event. Also, if dogs were "aired" in the test area the day before, dogs will have these scents to deal with as well.

Remember that it is okay to ask questions! Most judges will explain the scenario, run the test dog and then ask for questions. Often they will make sure you understand the test (order of the birds to go down, whether it is a walk-up, etc.) before you leave the last holding blind. If you are not sure, ask before you go to the line.

Remember that you cannot touch your dog while being judged. Judging usually starts when the dog and handler leave the holding blind and walk to the line. I just heard a handler relate that he had successfully completed all the marks and blinds for a senior test and he was in the honor box for the last part of the test. Then the stake had to "re-bird" which means the gunners came in to get more birds to throw for the remaining dogs in the test. He absent-mindedly stroked the top of his dog's head as they waited in the honor box. One judge turned to him and said, "Do you realize what you just *did*? You are out!" And that was the end of his hopes for a ribbon that day. Touching your dog during judging can be construed as either threatening or reassuring—either way, it is interference with the dog during judging.

I had one occasion when my dog came back from a retrieve with blood all over her face. I called it to the attention of the judges and asked if I could check her for an injury. They agreed and it turned out to be the duck's blood, not hers. But I did not touch her without the permission first.

Remember that your leash cannot be in sight—you can't hold it in your hand, loop it around your neck or have it dangling out of your pocket. This is considered threatening to the dog. Of course, if you are taking a junior dog to the line on lead, this is a different situation. But once the junior dog is sent, the lead must go into your pocket. For those of us running senior and master stakes, the leash or collar should never be visible.

Remember that you cannot talk to your dog after the first bird is in the air—the one exception being a walk-up where the judges have told you that you can give a “sit” command or whistle when the bird is in the air (or when the duck calls start).

Remember that the dog must deliver to hand. If the dog drops the bird and you pick it up off the ground, you are out. If the dog drops the bird to reposition its hold or for whatever reason just give the dog your command to fetch and have the dog finish the delivery to hand.

Remember that when your dog returns with a bird, you do NOT take the bird and toss it behind you! One of the judges should be in a position to take the bird from you. When running multiple marks, I normally hold on to the first bird behind my back while I line the dog for the second mark. After the dog has left my side for the second retrieve, then I relinquish the bird to the judge. I do this to cause as little distraction as possible to the dog as we are preparing for the next retrieve.

Remember that when you are excused from the line after completing a series in senior or master, you should NOT place your leash immediately on the dog. If the judges have not designated at what point you can put your dog on leash—and you forgot to ask—then turn to the line with your dog in the heel position and walk behind the judges away from the line. When you are behind the judges and out of the way of the working dog, then put your dog on leash.

Remember when your dog is being honored by the previous working dog to ask the honor dog handler if she is ready before you signal for your birds. (If the dog is honoring a walk-up situation, the judge will ask the honor handler if he is ready). This will help both of you in the long run. If the honor dog is not ready, it could break and interfere with your dog. Although this will most likely result in a re-run for you, it is still not a good situation.

Remember when you are in the gallery to talk quietly and keep motion to a minimum. If the gallery is behind the working line, keep in mind that motion in the gallery could be perceived as handling by the working dog—called “flash handling” or responding to movement—which might cause the dog and handler difficulty.

Remember to handle even disabled guns or cut-out guns as if they were firearms. Do not point them at the judges, the gallery, other dogs or people.

Remember that hunting tests are supposed to approximate hunting situations, so the water series could mean you need rubber boots to stay dry...or at least a change of socks!

Remember to make sure that your dog cannot see any of the test before going to the line. I was recently at a test where a handler unwittingly allowed his dog to see the blind being planted. It was called to the attention of the judges who asked this handler when he got to the line. He said that yes, he had wondered if he had done something wrong—and he was excused from the test.

Remember if you are comfortable enough to chat with the judges while your dog is running, you better keep one eye on your dog! Don't get lax or so comfortable that you forget to keep tabs on what is happening.

Remember that arguing with a judge or a marshal—besides being poor taste and poor sportsmanship—could be grounds for misconduct charges and could result in suspension. If you have questions or concerns about why you weren't called back, issues about another handler, suspicion of a bitch in heat or something else, please call it to the attention of the marshal and let the marshal handle it. It is the marshal's job to relay questions or concerns about the test, its participants or its observers to either the judges or the Hunt Test Committee for review.

Being the marshal is not an easy job! Everyone has a reason he or she should be given special compensation. We don't give the club volunteers near enough credit for the work they do so we can enjoy our sport. If you are a club member and physically able to help, then do it! Don't let the core group of club members get burned out and have them leave the sport.

Remember, like obedience shows, you cannot train your dog on the grounds. Also, if it is hot and you would like to get your dog wet to help beat the heat, check with the marshal. You need to make sure what water you use is not going to be used for a test, or that you will not be in view of a test running, so you are not interfering with the event.

Remember that any abusive behavior toward your dog, another dog, or another handler can result in your expulsion and possible AKC sanctions. This includes things like choking your dog down in the holding blind, slapping your dog with hand or leash to make the dog sit, etc. Yes, I saw all of this at a recent test—including an ear pinch in the holding blind before the dog and handler went to the line. All of this is inappropriate behavior.

Remember to compliment the club members when the test is well-run, the grounds are nice, etc. It is not easy finding grounds, the workers and judges that make these events happen.

Remember that the judges *are not being paid* to be there! They are there because they love the sport and they have given up their weekends, given up the chance to run their own dogs, taken vacation from jobs and time away from their families to be there. They are out in the weather all day too, often without the benefits participants have to sit in an air-conditioned car, get out of the rain, get to a toilet, have an unhurried lunch and relax after running a dog. (Can you tell I have been a judge?)

Most of all remember that this is supposed to be fun—at least part of the time! I still get nervous when I go to the line and of course it is always a shorter drive home when you have a ribbon to take with you. But we are doing this because the dogs want and need to do this, because we enjoy the camaraderie and we enjoy watching the dogs work.

Maureen McNames made a suggestion when I saw her at a recent hunt test. She thought it would be good to mention the names of some of the obedience people who are "crossing over" into the hunt test world. The problem is, I don't always know when I meet people whether they are participating in both arenas or not. If you see me at a hunt test, stop and chat! I will also try to do a better job of identifying people at the hunt tests I attend who are doing both obedience and field.

The people who I know and can name off the top of my head are Maureen McNames who has Labradors, Dorothy Kajer who has Golden Retrievers and Bob Self, Sr. who has Golden Retrievers and a Lab. They are all running their dogs in the senior or master levels.

Happy training!

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