

Field and Feather *The Retrieving Game*

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‘Tis the Season

Well, hunt test season is upon us. In my part of the country, hunt tests start usually the last week in April and run through the middle of October. My first test of the season will be the weekend of June 10.

I will be running two “newbies” this year—my three-year old chocolate Labrador, Blue, and my coming two-year old black Labrador, Stella. Blue will be skipping Junior Hunter going straight to Senior Hunter. Stella isn’t quite ready for Senior, so we will run her in Junior. Since we are already traveling with Blue, our philosophy is “may as well take two!” That was our philosophy when we participated in obedience trials too.

There are several reasons we do this. First, it gives us a training goal. We know where the dogs need to be in training to be prepared for the specific event. Second, like obedience and most other dog sports, there is a lot of “hurry up and wait” at hunt tests. We figure that with all the waiting time at Senior, it will give us a welcome break in the monotony to drive over to the Junior stake and run Stella. Third, it gives Stella an opportunity to get used to the excitement and chaos of a test environment. She will see and hear lots of new and strange things, see lots and lots of dogs and people and learn to wait patiently and QUIETLY until it is her turn to run. She will get some excellent experience, such as waiting in a holding blind while the dog ahead of her is running. This may not sound like a big thing, but think about it. A young dog that LOVES to retrieve has to learn to contain her excitement as shotguns and duck calls and live fliers are going on beyond the blind. It will be great practice for her to sit quietly without peeking around the blind. Even though we have practiced these things on our own, it is next to impossible to recreate the excitement and chaos of a real test. Your quiet, well-behaved obedience dog may turn into a screaming monster at a test! The excitement of the guns and birds stirs up deep, genetically programmed instincts that can sometimes take you by surprise. Here is what we have been working on with Blue and Stella.

Blue is a very exuberant dog with tons of retrieving desire. She lives to retrieve and to please her handler. Because of her extreme desire, she is sometimes overly enthusiastic, which can lead to breaking or poor blind manners (peeking around or over the blind, squiggling, whining, etc.). She is always well behaved at the line, but sometimes the excitement is too much and she will break after the first bird of a double, or she will return with her first bird and go for the second bird before she is sent. The breaking is easily corrected by not letting her have the bird when she breaks. She receives a strong “HERE!” or “HEEL!” command; I bring her back to the heel position, line her up and make her wait until she is sent.

I also test her steadiness. As I have mentioned in previous articles, judges will tell you when it is okay to send your dog by saying “dog” or by saying your running number. In training, before I send Blue for her bird, I will have someone standing behind me like a judge would, giving the signals. She will hear the word “dog” or a number being spoken, then I will wait a few seconds and give her the retrieve command. If I am by myself, I will test her with a series, for example: “dog” then “10” then “27” and finally “Blue!” which is her queue to go. With a dog like Blue, frequent training is

critical. The longer she goes between training sessions, the more excited she gets.

Stella is also a very driven dog. She loves the retrieving game and runs hard. I have been working her on being steady and she has been doing well. However, we discovered when my husband runs her, she reverts to her old habit of breaking as soon as the bumper hits the ground. So, we are back to using a check cord on her when my husband runs her. She has to learn that we both know the rules and she can't retrieve unless she follows those rules. It is also real important for Stella to lock in on the bird. She marks well, but sometimes gets so excited that she loses some focus. It is my job to make sure she maintains that focus. One way is to make sure she locks in on the gunner, then have the bird or bumper thrown and then have her sit a little longer, looking at the area of the fall, before I send her.

The biggest thing at this point is lots and lots of training. The dogs need to see lots of marks, practice honoring and walk-ups and work on waiting their turn in a holding blind. We have trouble getting access to water we can train in that is close to home, so I will be knocking on some doors to see if we can use near-by ponds. Water level is down this year because of a very dry winter, so some ponds I trained in last year are just mud holes this spring. Because we do not have water close by, trips for water training have to be planned in advance. One household emergency or complication can cancel a training session during the week, which makes weekend training all that more critical. And, the weather is already getting hotter so that limits what land work I can do after work. Yard drills (handling drills like three-handed casting) that I would normally do during the week is too much exertion for the dogs in hot, humid weather. I try to get the dogs to as many different places as I can to provide them with diverse experiences in cover, lay of the land, water. Training in the same place all the time makes training sessions predictable and sometimes boring for the dogs.

In addition to getting the dogs ready, I have to be ready! My favorite training/hunt test boots have developed a hole—so I need new boots. I have a different truck than last year, so I am in the process of making sure I can have good air circulation for the dogs; sun shading for when we are parked; a convenient water jug that doesn't take up much room and will hold enough water for a weekend. We have to check our lawn chairs to make sure we have something comfortable for all those long, long hours between each series. Important stuff!

With all this “work” involved, is it really FUN? You bet! I may not be thinking “fun” when I am at the line and fighting an attack of nerves, but it is fun when you get to visit with hunt test friends you haven't seen since last season, sharing stories of successes and failures. It is really fun when the test is over and you have that ribbon in your hand. In fact, I will be testing the “fun theory” at my club's hunt test this year—I am going to run my titled Master Hunter dog in Master to see how much more fun it can be when there isn't the self-imposed pressure of finishing a title hanging over my head! Scarlett will love getting a chance to work and I will love watching her work. Earning that first Master title was a bit nerve-wracking, but we made it, so now we can enjoy our success. And the young dogs continue to provide enjoyment and challenge as they work up the hunt test ranks.

Here's to a great 2000 hunt test season!

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