

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
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My first judging assignment

Well, I took my own quiz on whether I was hooked on the retrieving game—and depending on how you look at it, I either passed or failed with flying colors. I think the final proof was accepting my first invitation to judge a licensed hunt test this October.

AKC has put in place a new rule that anyone who judges hunt tests must attend a seminar once every three years. As soon as there was a seminar in my area, I attended. Some people who have been judging for a long time are annoyed that they have to attend a seminar—especially one that charges a fee to attend. For those of you who do not know, field trial and hunt test judges are not paid for their time or services. Usually the hosting club pays gas, motel bills and meals, but that isn't much when the judge takes time off from work to drive long distances, work long hours in all kinds of weather (and circumstances) and then gets questioned on his or her judging decisions. We must love the sport, or we are all gluttons for punishment!

I didn't know what to expect from the seminar, but I found it helpful. It wasn't a lesson on how to set up testing scenarios, but it did cover what is expected at the various test levels and what mistakes judges seem to be making. For example, there are specific guidelines for each event. Some judges have been passing junior dogs that do not meet the guidelines. In contrast, some judges at the master level are making the tests more of an elimination situation rather than testing the dogs against the standards. The challenge for any judge is to be very familiar with the rules and regulations as well as flexible enough to compensate for circumstances that complicate tests, such as weather conditions, help (or lack of it) equipment and the grounds. The seminar also addressed misconduct—what it is, how to report it and what the consequences are.

The seminar stressed that the co-judges for an event should agree ahead of time on issues such as: what constitutes the area of the fall; what distance from the line will be acceptable creeping versus making the handler re-heel the dog; what constitutes a “no bird” and things as basic as who will signal the gunners and who will signal the handler to release her dog. Luckily, my co-judge is a friend who will be comfortable for me to work with.

I have also thought about what I have liked in judges over the years and what I wish I had known as a handler. I want to make sure that handlers feel comfortable asking questions before coming to the line and that handlers know what is expected for each series. Some handlers have never read the rules and regulations and have expectations that do not match the event. For example, a junior dog that goes out to the bird, brings it back to the line but refuses to release it to the handler, or won't deliver to hand should not pass. Judges have various levels of tolerance as to how long is long enough for a handler to coax a dog to deliver to hand, but this is a basic requirement that shouldn't be a big struggle. A young or inexperienced dog may drop

the bird or want to do a little parade around the handler before delivering to hand. But playing with the bird, refusing to release it, crunching or chewing the bird, or dropping it and refusing to pick it up again are signs of a dog that is not ready for the junior hunter level.

Hunt tests are supposed to approximate hunting situations whenever possible, taking into account that there must be some consistency in the retrieving setups so each dog gets an equal opportunity. However, many handlers at hunt tests are not bird hunters, so there are issues that cannot be taken for granted. For example, those of us who do hunt and train with real firearms know the basics of gun safety. Some handlers at hunt tests have never handled a gun. Although handlers are not required to shoot a gun, they are required to carry a gun for at least part of a test to make the situation more like a hunting situation. Many clubs use a wooden cutout of a shotgun shape, but some clubs use actual shotguns for the handlers. These guns will never be loaded, but all the basics of gun safety still apply. It is good practice for the judges to reiterate how the gun should be handled and what they want to happen during the series.

At the same time, it is not the judges' responsibility to give a synopsis of the rules and regulations for the level of test. The handler is supposed to be familiar with these requirements and should only ask for clarification of a particular setup or situation, not a full explanation of how hunt tests work. I appreciate judges who explain the setup, ask for questions, run a test dog and then ask for questions again. This gives the handlers the opportunity to make sure they understand what is expected and how the scenario should unfold.

If your dog is dropped, the judges should be willing to explain why. However, you need to make sure that you are not interrupting the continuation of the test. Ask the marshal to find out when the judges can talk with you. The entries for tests can easily be 30-50 dogs per event so don't expect the judges to remember your dog. All the judges will know is the dog's number and the notes taken as your dog ran. I always diagram out the series, showing whatever cover or obstacles and the route the dog takes to the birds. I make notes about things that impress me or that need to be considered, such as vocalizing or other inappropriate behavior of the dog or handler. That way, I can do a better job of recalling each dog's performance for my own benefit when I compare notes with my co-judge and when/if a handler has a question.

Now I have to do my homework. I need to review the Rules and Regulations again to make sure I am up to date with any changes in the Junior and Senior rules (I will be judging both). I will review my seminar notes again to refresh my memory. I will hope for good weather, lots of help and few no-birds. But mostly, I will remember what it is like to be a handler—what eagerness and anxiety can do to a handler and what the judge can do to help decrease some of that! Hopefully, I will be able to apply these principles as a judge.

Until next time—happy training!

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