

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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Random thoughts

I don't have a main theme this time, but I want to share some thoughts.

I judged the spring Mid-Illinois hunt test (Junior and Senior) and I want to mention again some of the things I see in handlers, particularly handlers at the Junior level.

First, **READ THE RULES!!!** We had several participants who had not read the rules and didn't even know there were guidelines. It's great that people find out about a new sport and want to participate with their dogs, but if you are encouraging or mentoring someone, please be sure they get a copy of the "Regulations and Guidelines for AKC Hunting Tests for Retrievers" from AKC. You are doing them a great favor. If you haven't seen a hunt test before, go observe a test and ask questions of the participants so you get an even better idea about what is required BEFORE you enter your dog.

Here are some of the things my co-judge and I encountered:

- Handlers who didn't know they had to be quiet after signaling for the birds.
- Handlers who pointed the marks out to the dogs—one man had his whole arm out in front of the dog! When I told him to put his arm down, he said, "I thought we could do whatever it took to make sure the dog got the bird." Not quite.
- Dogs that vocalized in the holding blind or on the line.
- Dogs that didn't even have the most basic obedience such as "heel" and "sit."
- Handlers who had to cajole, beg, plead or threaten their dogs to deliver to hand. My co-judge and I counted 12 "fetch it up" commands from one handler. The dog must deliver to hand without being coerced or begged, and without any "dive and grab" maneuvers by the handler.
- Dogs that had never had a live flier before! This is critical. A dog cannot perform in the field without being properly exposed to birds. Sure, we probably all know someone who took his/her dog to a JH test with little training and no birds and the dog passed. This is rare. When we had watched one dog "blink" the live flier several times (that means the dog found the bird and left the area without the bird), I asked the handler how many times the dog had retrieved a live flier. The answer? Never. Then he said the dog had only retrieved a dead bird twice. We pointed out the bird wrangler to him and told him to go buy some ducks. I was guilty of this mistake with my first hunt test dog, but I learned my lesson quickly.

Many of us don't have facilities where we can keep live birds, but most of us have freezers where we can keep dead birds (once you get the spouse used to the idea!). As disgusting as it sounds, you can get numerous uses out of dead birds before they are too "ripe" to freeze again. It usually isn't too hard to find someone who has live birds—then all you need is someone to shoot them for you. There are enough hunters among us—family members, friends, neighbors, whether they train dogs or not—who would be happy to work on their shooting skills while providing fliers for your dog. This sport takes time and training and we have to work at it to get our dogs what they need to succeed.

- Dogs that crunched or destroyed the birds. The purpose of a retriever is to bring game birds back fit for the table. That means an intact bird that can be cleaned and prepared for human consumption. Obviously the birds will have wounds from the shot, but the dog should not chew, eat, rip, tear or crunch the bird, no matter how tempting. Most clubs try to make sure that any nasty birds (old, heads missing, gaping wounds) are not reused at a test.
- Handlers who were “training” their dogs. I saw one handler who tested the dog’s “hold” by pretending to take the bird several times and then removing his hands. A TEST IS NOT A TRAINING SESSION.

With the dogs and handlers running Senior, things were much better. The handlers were fairly well versed in the rules and needed little coaching or correcting. Overall, the dogs performed well too, especially for water work so early in the season. However, we did have two dogs refuse the water—one on the flier and one that didn’t want to get back into the water after retrieving the first bird.

That’s it for comments about the judging assignment.

Now I would like to give an update on Ruby. If you recall, Ruby is the young dog I took through Mike Lardy’s training workshop this spring. During the workshop Ruby and I reviewed walking fetch and stick fetch and then started three-handed cast. My “to-do” list from Mike was first to get her steady because that was causing problems with 3-handed cast. Done. Ruby is now “lead steady.”

Second, I was to finish three-handed cast. Done. Ruby loves the “game” and maintained great enthusiasm through the whole process.

Then I was to proceed to collar conditioning. This was more of a challenge for me and I think for most amateur handlers. The capacity to use the collar incorrectly is so huge that I worried about “messing her up” for life through my inexperience. However, I followed the steps and we got through it. It wasn’t fast and it wasn’t without problems, but we were able to complete collar conditioning in about 10 sessions over a two-week period. Whew! Glad that is behind us!

After collar conditioning you are supposed to re-visit three-handed cast to test the conditioning. Basically, this is where you would first use the collar correction for a “sit” or “here” command if the dog does not respond properly in the drill. We got through that very quickly, which told me she understood both three-handed cast and the collar pressure for “sit” or “here.”

During this same time, I have kept up with her fieldwork. I have been enforcing steadiness with a short lead. She now waits for my hand to be in the send position and for me to say her name, without any pressure on the lead. It was not a big battle—I had just never required her to be steady. As soon as I did, she understood and complied. No tugging means birds!

We have also started a process called “bird in mouth” to help prepare her for learning doubles. The concept is simple. You have two single marks set up. When the dog comes back from the first mark, have the dog heel and continue to hold the bumper/bird while watching the second mark go down. If the dog drops the bumper in the excitement of watching the second mark, place the bumper in the mouth and use the “hold” command to make sure the dog holds the bumper until you take it. Take the bumper, and send the dog for the second mark. Ruby is now fairly comfortable with this process, so we will soon try her on her first double. Something else we have started is taking notes on each training session. Lardy keeps a written history for all of his dogs. Even if you only have one dog, you can’t remember everything that happened in the last training session, much less a session weeks ago. It just makes sense to

keep notes. For fieldwork, we diagram the setup--including wind direction and weather conditions--then make notes on each dog's performance. This gives you a reference point for the next session, and also helps point out weaknesses that might call for a return to the yard to reinforce a concept. It can also point out your weakness in setting up tests appropriate for the terrain or conditions.

What's next for Ruby? In the yard, we will proceed to "line and casting to the pile" to build on the casting exercise and lay the groundwork for the double-T exercise. We will introduce doubles in the field, maintaining steadiness. I will continue to report on our progress.

That's it for now. Happy training!