

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
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Winding down and gearing up

Well, the hunt test season is winding down for us and it wasn't a particularly good season either! Some problems were handler error (I can still make BIG mistakes!), some were lack of preparation of the dog for the circumstances encountered, some were the dog--and one situation was a poor test. So it goes. I have become fond of referring to running hunt tests as just another form of legalized gambling—"you pay your money and you take your chances!" The best way to hedge your bets is lots of training and exposure to different situations. We didn't get the opportunity to follow that plan this spring/summer and it caught up with us.

That is one big way that field work is different from obedience. The obedience rings are always the same size, the pattern is the same, what's expected from the dog and handler is the same. There may be variables like the size of the building, or inside versus outside, but for the most part obedience circumstances are controlled and fairly uniform. In the field, you never know what you will encounter! I guess that is the challenge and the attraction—and when you triumph, it is a great feeling.

We certainly know what we need to work on for next year. We have more than enough to keep us busy through the fall, winter and spring. Hopefully next year my life (work and family) won't interfere with my dog life, but it is hard to predict things out of your control.

As we take a short breather and a bit of relaxation after a hectic summer schedule, thoughts turn to gearing up for the hunting season. The dogs need to be kept in shape. Pheasant hunting requires lots of muscle strength and stamina to cover acres of upland and work in heavy cover; duck and goose hunting requires a strong, healthy dog to fight the cold, choppy water and deal with several hours of chilly temperatures. The dogs are always in better shape than I am! We didn't get to hunt much last season, so hopefully this season will bring nicer weather and more chances for hunting. Yes, I can be a fair weather hunter, especially when it comes to duck hunting! I can't take much sitting in cold and wet conditions—and there can be a lot of sitting and waiting during duck hunting!

My dogs don't mind a few days off, but after a while they begin to pout if they don't get to retrieve. So, until the hunting season arrives, I will continue to work my dogs on land and water, giving them both marks and blinds. I will try to throw in some sessions of yard work and handling drills too, to keep them on their toes. They will get lots of swimming time and time to run and play. We don't want it all work all the time, but for my dogs "work" equals "fun." They live to retrieve.

We also have a new puppy in the family. This pup is my husband's dog, so I have been relegated to the back seat on training and bonding. It will be fun to watch the

pup grow and watch the bond strengthen between my husband and the pup as the winter progresses. They have obedience training and all sorts of things to keep them busy over the winter.

In the spring, we will have a new team of dog and handler going to the line and I will be in the gallery. That will be quite a change for me, but one I am happy to have. Of course, I will still have my “girls” to run, so I won’t be idle by any means. It will just be fun to watch for a change, instead of always being at the line. And it will be fun to watch my husband play the game instead of him always watching me. Maybe he will find out that it is more difficult to make those split second decisions at the line than it appears from the gallery!

Some of you may be switching back to obedience, agility or other performance activities during the winter months. I have found that most dogs can make the switch fairly easily between field and other performance events. They can tell the difference in equipment and surroundings and will adjust accordingly. If you are planning on more field work in the spring, you should continue to have a few retrieving sessions throughout the winter. It doesn’t have to be real structured, but do toss a bumper or two (or dumbbell) farther than is required in the obedience ring to keep the retrieving fire burning. And remember fun games like hiding bumpers under dead leaves or in the snow for your dog to practice “hunting it up” so the dog uses its nose instead of its eyes. You can even hide a favorite toy somewhere in the house and teach your dog “hunt it up.” The dogs love the game and it can brighten up an otherwise boring day.

At the end of the day, the most important thing is our time together with our four-legged friends. A good day ends with my feet up, a cat in my lap and as much Labrador in my lap as will fit—sometimes things get a bit crowded but it always makes me smile.

Happy training and happy down time!

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