

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
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One of my readers has Vizslas and asked if we would like to hear about hunt tests for pointing dogs. I thought this would be a good opportunity to learn about a different field event, but one that still requires the same basic skills—obedience, delivery to hand, honoring. Although many retriever breeds are used for upland game hunting, only in warmer climates can the pointing breeds be used for waterfowl hunting. Part of that has to do with the double coats of the retrievers that include an undercoat for warmth and a topcoat for water resistance to protect them from cold water. But more than that, the pointing breeds have been bred for a specific purpose and they are best at that particular field “game.” Here are Marcia Schlesinger’s comments about the AKC Hunting Tests for Pointers. Marcia has earned JH, SH, MH, FC, UD and UDX titles on her Vizslas. She presently has a young gundog in training.

The upland game bird hunter needs a dog that can hunt all day, find and point game and hold it until the hunter is able to get within shotgun range to shoot the bird. The pointing breeds that have been selectively bred to run long and hard and find and point game are the three setters, English, Irish and Gordon, the Pointer and the Continental breeds (Brittany, German Shorthaired Pointer, German Wirehaired Pointer, Vizsla, Weimaraner, Wirehaired Pointing Griffon and Italian Spinoni). What sets this group of dogs apart from all of the rest of the dog breeds is the fact that through selective breeding, all of the pointers have been bred to have an exaggerated stalk instinct. Although all animals may stalk their prey, the exaggerated stalk of the pointers causes the dog to freeze and remain motionless when it encounters game. Hence the dog literally points its game. It is no wonder that pointing is a requirement for qualifying in all levels of AKC Hunt Tests for Pointing Breeds.

Like the Retriever hunt tests, the Pointing Breed hunt tests also come in three levels, Junior, Senior and Master. The goal of the hunt tests is to assess the qualities of a pointing dog as a valuable hunting companion. The Master dog must put in a finished performance and it has been said that the master dog does everything on its own except flush the bird and pull the trigger. All of the requirements for earning the MH are directly related to hunting safely and conserving game. Obviously the dog must hunt, find and point game. The dog must work independently and search out appropriate objectives. However, it should check back with its handler so that the two of them work as a team. In addition, since most hunters spend the day with a human companion who may also have a dog, the dogs must be able to work in pairs or braces. When game is encountered, the finished gundog should point it until the hunter flushes the bird. Sometimes the dog is out of sight for a considerable length of time. But a well-trained gundog will stand over its game until the hunter finds the dog. For safety reasons, the dog should not chase the bird or go to retrieve it until told to do so by the handler. And of course, the dog should retrieve the bird with a soft mouth directly to hand. While the pointing dog stands over the bird, any other dogs in the field should honor that dog. If they do not honor or “back” the pointing dog, they may cause the birds to fly off before the hunter gets within shotgun range. There is always a safety concern when live guns are used and all of the dogs in the field should remain stationary so that the hunter can concentrate on shooting the bird rather than being distracted by moving dogs. On occasion, the dogs are running with the wind rather than into the wind and they cannot scent the birds. Under these circumstances, it is possible that birds flush on their own. When this happens, the master dog should immediately stop to the flush because the hunter will try to shoot the bird.

The AKC hunt tests have been designed to simulate hunting situations. Game birds (quail/chukar/pheasants or pigeons) are released on the course and all tests run dogs in pairs or braces. The handlers and the gallery walk but the judges and the marshal may ride horses. The Junior level course is run for a minimum of 15 minutes and the senior and master courses must be at least 30 minutes. There usually is a designated “bird field” where the gunners for the Senior and Master tests are and where the flushed birds will be shot for the dogs to retrieve. If a bird is encountered on other portions of the course or not shot by a gunner, then the handler in all three levels (JH, SH, MH) will fire a blank gun after the bird is flushed. This demonstrates that the dog is not gun-shy and also gives a signal to the dog that this bird encounter is over.

During the running of its brace, the junior pointing dog must demonstrate independence and a keen desire to hunt and find game. It should run around the course and look for game in the appropriate spots. It must establish point and it must show some obedience to its handler’s commands. In the Junior test, it is permissible for the dog to cause the bird to flush and the dog is also allowed to chase the bird. The Junior level test really assesses potential as a gundog.

The senior level dog must also have a keen desire to hunt and find game. The handler must be able to flush the bird and the dog must retrieve the downed bird. The senior dog must also honor its brace mate but the handler will hold the dog by the collar during the brace mate’s retrieve. The senior dog may be cautioned on how to perform throughout all of these elements by its handler. Success at the Senior level demonstrates a dog that is an adequate hunting companion. It has all of the elements of a finished gundog but is still rough around the edges.

The Master dog must put in a finished performance. The master dog must have a keen desire to hunt and find game. It must point staunchly and be steady to wing and shot. It may retrieve only when released by its handler and it must retrieve absolutely to hand. It must honor its brace mate on point and stand throughout the brace mate’s retrieve. The master dog must hunt for its handler at all times and handle kindly with an absolute minimum of noise and hacking by the handler. For both the senior and master levels, if a bird flushes on its own in front of a dog, the dog must “stop to the flush.”

The Junior level test primarily tests pointing instinct, hunting desire and potential. Any pointing dog that is born with a strong pointing instinct should be able to earn a JH with very little training. In fact "training" usually consists of setting out birds in a field and letting the dog find and point the game. The handler may encourage the dog to hold point by using a check cord (long leash), styling up the point (encouraging intensity and a rigid tail) and restraining the dog from flushing the bird. However, the senior and master level tests require a considerable amount of training, similar to the increased level of training in going from a CD to a CDX and then to the UD. The senior/master dog must work independently yet handle and hunt for its handler. It must also remain stationary when the bird is flushed (a stand-stay under the most tempting proofing conditions). It must honor its brace mate and it must be able to retrieve. Like the pointing instinct, some dogs are "natural" backers and some are "natural" retrievers. But in all cases, these skills are usually reinforced with training. Although most pointing dog enthusiasts call this training "yard work," we who have trained dogs in obedience, would consider this "yard work" good old-fashioned basic obedience training. Most trainers teach the dog to heel and come. But by far, the most important command that the pointing dog must know and perform is the "whoa" or "stand-stay." The "whoa" is used to teach the dog to be steady to wing and shot. It is also the command that is used when teaching a dog to honor its brace mate. Once the dog is taught the basic commands many trainers use electric collars to maintain control and correct the dog when it is running at great distances in the field.

For me the attraction of working with and training pointing dogs is that fine line between independence and control. It is the challenge of taking raw potential and turning it into a finished product. The AKC hunt tests are not the end point of all the training but rather the beginning of a relationship with a hunting partner. I certainly appreciate the orange qualifying ribbons and the titles but the most rewarding moment that I ever had was when a gunner at a hunt test came up to me and said "I would be honored to hunt over your dog."

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Photo is of
DC Krackerjack's Bela Barktalk MH, UDX "Boomer"
(note the dog honoring in the background)

