

Field and Feather  
The Retrieving Game  
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## The HUGE Leap from Senior Hunter to Master Hunter

Well, you have a Senior Hunter title on your dog. Congratulations! Now it is on to Master. But what can you expect? Well, Master is a whole different game.

According to the AKC publication *Regulations and Guidelines for AKC Hunting Tests for Retrievers*, the Master test is required to include the following:

**Section 4. Master Hunting Test.** Dog shall be tested in a minimum of five hunting situations as follows: multiple landmarks, multiple water marks, multiple marks on water and land, a land blind and a water blind (at least one that shall be a double blind in any combination). There shall be at least three series. At least one of the series shall include a walk-up. Diversion birds and/or diversion shots such as described in Chapter 3, Section 23, must be used at least once. In Master tests, in at least one multiple marking situation the dog's marking will be tested with at least 3 falls, before the dog is sent to retrieve.

Note the phrase in the last sentence "with at least three falls before the dog is sent to retrieve." This means that at least one of the setups must include three birds down — a "triple" or other scenario where the dog watches three falls before being sent. Although the regulations state that there must be "at least" three series, in my experience running dogs, I have not seen many Master tests that had fewer than four series and most had five.

The Senior rules state that a double retrieve is the most complicated retrieve can be. In Master, you could see a quadruple mark, a triple, or something called a "double-double." With a "double-double," the dog watches two birds go down and the judge tells you to send the dog after the second bird is down. When the dog returns with that last bird down, another double is shot. So now the dog has the current two birds to remember, plus the first bird down in that first double. It is a setup that requires good memory on the part of the dog and handler as well as good control.

You could have any of these scenarios with a diversion bird, or maybe even a "poison" bird. A poison bird is one thrown that the dog does not get to retrieve. It is used to tempt the dog away from its intended bird and is a way to show control and trainability of the dog.

A properly set up Master test will approximate a hunting situation as much as possible, allowing each dog to be tested on the same basic components. The rules state "natural hazards, obstacles, **numerous decoys**, hunting equipment and implements shall be utilized to a somewhat greater degree than in the Senior Hunting Test." (Emphasis AKC).

"Numerous decoys" does not mean two at the shoreline. The decoys should be placed like you would put out a spread of decoys for hunting. They should be

placed to lure the birds into shooting range, not sprinkled across the lake or across a field to distract the dog.

Remember that these are supposed to be "finished" retrievers, which means they have the depth of experience and training to be a reliable, skilled hunting partner. Working through a spread of decoys should be routine, as should climbing in and out of a boat or sitting in a blind. The guidelines also state that although there are no prescribed lengths to the retrieves, Master level retrieves "are more severe and difficult than Senior Hunting situations." This means the birds can be at tighter angles to each other, can be thrown in -line to each other, can cover more challenging terrain, etc.

As with Senior level tests, switching is considered a "0" in perseverance and the dog will be disqualified. Failure to be steady or deliver to hand will also result in a "0" score for trainability.

In Senior level tests, moderate creeping will be tolerated. This same amount of creeping at the Master level would be judged much more harshly because these are supposed to be finished retrievers. So if you have a creeping problem now, you better fix it! Don't take your chances that the judge will be lenient. A creeping dog is a dog on the verge of breaking and therefore out of control.

Because Senior dogs are considered to be a less experienced, less trained level, handling a dog to a mark is judged according to the level of the test. However, handling a dog to a mark at the Master level should be scored "with greater stringency" in the categories of marking and perseverance. Judges must take into account the conditions of the test and judge accordingly. Here is a point emphasized in the guidelines :

**Adog that goes to the area of the fall and finds the bird unaided shall be scored appreciably higher than a dog that must be handled to a bird.**

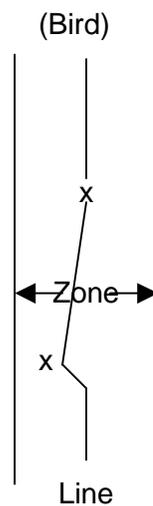
Again, the emphasis is on the higher level of training, skill and experience.

The blinds in Senior must be outside the marks. This means that the line of the blind cannot go in between two marks that the dog has already run. A dog at the Senior level is considered a started dog, but not finished enough to handle more complicated situations like a blind in between two marks.

In Master, the blind can be between the marks, which adds just a little more complication, requiring much more skilled training and handling for the dog/handler team. The handling work is expected to be crisp, with a good initial line. It isn't the number of whistles — it is the successful implementation of each cast and command. The dog should respond quickly to the "sit" whistle, should take the cast accurately and respond quickly to the next whistle and cast. There will be times that terrain, wind, heavy cover, or other circumstances require more whistles than others and judges should take those factors into consideration when setting and judging a particular test.

When the guidelines refer to a “double blind,” that means that two blinds are run back-to-back. For example the series might include a water blind, and then as soon as that is completed you run your dog on a land blind.

There is something called “challenging the blind,” which basically means you should stick as close to the line of the blind as you can. I usually visualize a channel or zone to the blind — I set a mental left and right “edge” of the zone that defines the “line” to the blind. Then I handle my dog to keep her within that zone. A blind with only two whistles is no good if the handler lets the dog take big zigzags to the bird. Of course a blind with 30 whistles isn’t good either!



If the X symbolizes a whistle sit, then you can see that this dog took a good initial line, then veered off to the left a bit. The handler stopped the dog and gave a right angle back. The handler stopped the dog again when it crossed the center of the “zone” and gave a straight “back” to the bird.

I have found if I visualize this zone, it helps me determine when I should stop the dog and handle to correct the line. The edges of your zone could be a tree, a change in cover, or some other landmark that helps you visualize the proper line to the bird. Forward progress is good as long as the dog doesn't get too far off line. How far off line becomes much more exact at the Master level.

The bottom line is that Master is — and should be — much more demanding and much more precise. To quote the guidelines one more time, “Master Hunting dogs must exhibit those qualities expected in a truly finished and experienced hunting companion.”

Happy training!

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