

Hunt test tips

Some behavior I witnessed at hunt tests this past season illustrated to me that many people do not familiarize themselves with the guidelines before participating. Ignorance is no excuse, and can get you dropped due to handler error. Here are some examples.

Handlers are required to handle a gun at all three test levels now. I think this is ridiculous at the junior level where the dog is on-leash because the handler can't manage a leash and a gun easily. However, it is a rule now and must be enforced. The gun must be handled as if it were a loaded gun and proper gun safety must be observed. That means you can't tuck it under your arm casually, wave it around at the judges or gallery and cannot use it as a cane or an elbow rest. The judges are obligated to issue one warning for improper handling. A second infraction can result in you being dismissed. As silly as this may seem to those of you who don't hunt, the hunt test program was established to show the dog's suitability as a hunting companion and the tests are supposed to approximate hunting situations as much as possible. This means using guns (or facsimiles) and other hunting equipment/attire.

In the senior and master level stakes, the dogs are to be off-leash and under control. The leash should be removed in the last holding blind before you approach the line. The leash must be COMPLETELY out of sight in your pocket, or left behind at the holding blind. A leash dangling out of your pocket can be misconstrued as a threat to the dog or as a training device and therefore must be out of sight. Again the judges will issue a warning on your first offense and you can be dismissed for a second offense. Do not argue with the judges; this is clearly stated in the regulations and it is the handler's responsibility to be familiar with these regulations and to adhere to them.

When you are coming off the line after running a series of senior or master, DO NOT pull your lead out of your pocket and place it on your dog UNTIL YOU ARE BEHIND THE JUDGES and no longer under judgment. The dogs are supposed to heel off-leash to and from the line to demonstrate trainability and control. Some judges will tell you where you can re-leash your dog—for example, when you are back to the area of the holding blind, or perhaps simply behind the judges. If you are not sure, ask before you run. The judges will be glad to clarify.

Do not come off the line cursing the judges because they warned you about improper leash handling or re-leashing your dog too soon. Your ignorance is not their fault!

Once you are under judgment—which means when you are called to the line—you CANNOT touch your dog again until you are no longer under judgment. The hunt test regulations state:

Section 11. In Senior and Master Hunting Tests, a handler shall not hold or touch a dog to keep it steady, or verbally restrain a dog on line, except in extraordinary circumstances, from the time the first bird is being thrown until the dog's number is called. Violation of any of the provisions of this paragraph is sufficient cause to justify a grade of "0" in Trainability.

Even if you are asked to take the dog back into the holding area while a blind is planted, you cannot touch your dog! If you need to touch your dog for some reason, ask the judges for permission before you do it. For example, my dog came back from a retrieve with blood all over the bridge of her nose. I asked if I could wipe the blood off to see if it was duck blood or if she had a cut. The judges gave me permission and watched while I checked her. The whole point is to make sure that you do not do something that could be construed as training (like an ear pinch) or as intimidating.

Don't be afraid to ask questions of the judges before the test begins. Normally, they will give some general information before the test dog runs and they will take questions after the test dog runs. If you aren't there for the test dog, ask the marshal, or ask one of the judges when you are still in the holding blind. If the test is a walk-up and you don't know that, you don't get a "do over." Be sure you know the setup of the test, for example whether it is a walk-up or whether the judge will send you on "dog" or your number. It is your responsibility as the handler to be informed and prepared.

There is a common misconception at the senior level about handling on marks. Over and over again I hear people say "You only get one handle in senior." That isn't exactly right. Here is what the regulations state:

Section 3. Senior Hunting Test

(5) Dogs may be handled on marks, but excessive handling requires a lower score in perseverance and/or marking. A dog that goes to the area of the fall and finds the bird unaided must be scored appreciably higher than a dog that must be handled to a bird.

So a dog that marks well and retrieves the bird cleanly without much of a hunt will be scored appreciably higher than a dog that has to be handled. Obviously, "marks" are meant to be a marking test, but there can be circumstances that may get the dog in the area for a good hunt, but the dog doesn't come up with the bird. A quick, clean handle to assist the dog is looked upon much more highly than a dog that has a big, long hunt and a handler who doesn't know when to assist the dog by handling. Or, perhaps the wind changed and your dog takes a great line, but is on the backside of the bird. These things happen and part of the trick to being a good handler is to know when the dog needs assistance. Letting your dog hunt and hunt and hunt and hunt just so you don't "use up a handle" is not good.

Remember too that any time you are handling, whether to a mark or to a blind, the handling should be "crisp" and "clean." This means you don't give one hand signal and then let the dog hunt it up. Once you are handling the dog, you must continue handling until the dog is to the bird. Hopefully, the handles will be as crisp and precise as you and your dog can make them. At the senior level, handling isn't expected to be polished and should be judged accordingly. At the master level, you are supposed to be running a "finished retriever" so the standard is higher.

Inexperienced handlers can sometimes be careless as part of the gallery. Don't talk too loud or move around too much, especially if the gallery is placed behind the line where

movement could be a distraction to a dog being handled. Be ever vigilant about where the handler is and whether getting up to walk back to your truck will possibly be a distraction.

When it is your time to move toward the line, be sure that you move from one holding blind to the next ONLY when your dog cannot see the birds fall and when you will not interfere with the working dog. Usually, the best time to move up is when the working dog has just been sent for the birds.

Don't bring a dog on leash near the line or to sit in the gallery. Even if the dog is not participating in the event, it is a distraction and could cause problems if the dog barks, gets loose, lunges at or attacks a person or another dog. Just remember that you don't want to do anything that can be perceived as interfering with the test. It is a courtesy to the other handlers and dogs that hopefully will be extended to you as well.

Just remember: know the rules, ask the judges for clarification, be prepared. You don't want to be disqualified for something you could have avoided. Then all you have to do is get rid of the butterflies and get that ribbon!

Happy Training!

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