

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
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They are all different!

They say you shouldn't compare your children, that you should accept each for the individual he/she is. The same is true for dogs, but in either case it is difficult to keep from comparing.

The first Labrador I did hunt tests with is my BJ (BJ turned 14 in August!). BJ has always been very deliberate and calculating. Some would say she lacked style because she didn't perform her retrieves as fast as other dogs, but you could tell she wanted to be there and she wanted to please me. Even at age 14, she will still retrieve with a bounce in her step and a wag in her tail. On her birthday, she got to have a private swim and some retrieves in the pond without the young wiper-snappers interfering with her fun.

We stopped at JH with BJ because she was four when we found out about hunt tests. It seemed that we should start from the beginning with a younger dog and see how far we could get.

That younger dog is my Scarlett. She is much more driven—possibly obsessed—with the need to retrieve. It isn't just to please *me*...it is a fire in her belly that she must feed or else she will explode. At the same time, she is the best housedog and lap dog you could ever want. She is a joy to train and run. Everything comes easily to her. If I screw up, she does the right thing anyway. She makes me look good! Most of the time, I feel like I am just there to take the ducks. The rest is all up to her. Scarlett is my first Master Hunter, so she holds a special place in my heart. Scarlett had her SH at three years old and her MH at four with time out for puppies. Since this was my first attempt at SH or MH, I assumed her progress was "normal."

Then there is Stella. Stella is Scarlett's daughter, and even though she has that same fire in the belly, she has been slow to mature. When I say "slow to mature," I mean that she hasn't had the same intensity as Scarlett as far as focus and ability to understand complex concepts. Finally at age five, she is becoming more focused and is learning more complicated things that she needs for Senior Hunter. It has been hard **not** to compare her to momma Scarlett, but I could see her potential and I knew we would get there eventually. We had some frustrating times and seemed to even go backwards now and then. But now, it has all clicked and she is running well.

I have another dog named Blue. Blue is a very intense, hard running dog. She also must retrieve to justify her existence. The problem we have with Blue is that she gets so excited, sometimes she forgets to play by the rules. This is VERY frustrating, knowing her potential and her marking abilities. Senior Hunter came easily, but Master Hunter has eluded us because sometimes Blue forgets this game is a team effort. Sometimes she will break on the honor; sometimes she will decide that I don't have a clue where the blind is and she will try it on her own. All of these things can be addressed in training to a certain point, but the actual hunt test situation is something you can't really re-create in training. So, we work with her, focusing on her "issues" and then try again.

The main lesson has been that they can't all be like Scarlett. Each dog has had her own challenges—different challenges at different times—and each has needed different solutions to those challenges. It is so true when people say a good trainer doesn't make the dog fit the program, but tailors the program to fit the dog. You must be able to recognize that the "standard" isn't working with a particular dog, and make adjustments accordingly. Sometimes we need the input of others to realize this. That's why it is so helpful to have more experienced trainers or even a professional trainer you can work with to help work through these challenges.

I have added to my challenges by having several dogs working at different levels all at the same time. However, if you are setting up some marks for dogs running at different levels, it makes you think more about the pitfalls of a particular setup. You have to consider how it will look to the dog running singles and just learning about longer marks and different terrain, versus the master level dog. I try to set up a multiple mark situation where my less experienced dogs can run it as singles or a double, but the master level dog can run it as a triple. Sometimes that means changing the line or the order of the marks for the less-experienced dogs. And many times, I don't foresee a problem that becomes painfully apparent when I send the dog for a mark. In fact, I usually run the more experienced dog first to check the mechanics—if the experienced dog has trouble with something, you can bet that the younger dogs will have the same trouble. Many times I have neglected to take into account something that makes the marks harder than I anticipated. But the dogs give it their best and we try again on another setup. It is a good thing that Labradors are so flexible and forgiving!

If you have the luxury of a regular training group, consider yourself lucky! It is such a treat to have enough hands to throw marks, enough different experience levels to evaluate different set-ups and help you learn. Sometimes you are lucky enough to find someone whose dog has had the same problem with a concept, so you can compare notes and find new things to try. Although I train by myself most of the time out of necessity, I try to have at least one training session a month with someone else.

And since I can't seem to get enough of this game, we have a new member of the gang. Ruby is also a daughter of Scarlett out of Scarlett's final litter. Many of her personality traits, mannerisms and abilities seem to be closely following Scarlett...is it possible that I FINALLY have my next Scarlett? Only time—and lots of attention—will tell. The comparisons have already begun...

Happy training!

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