

Field and Feather The Retrieving Game

This column is a reprint of an article first run in the *Golden Retriever News*. I feel what Susan Kluesner highlights in this article pertain to any and all breeds participating in hunt tests — or other performance events for that matter. Susan agreed to have the article reprinted in *Front and Finish*. I addressed some of these same issues in my article “You Gotta’ have Style” when I talked about dogs that really don’t want to be in the field and don’t want to retrieve, but Susan takes it a bit further.

The price of winning at any cost By Susan Kluesner

Stop and take a look at what our American culture says about competition and winning. We live in an environment where winning is taught to be everything regardless of the cost and losing is not acceptable. We are each taught, from a young age, that one must not only win but win more often than others and “bigger.” Plus, losers are... well, losers.

This win at any cost culture is especially noticeable in sports, including in our world of dogs. In our dog world I believe we need to be careful that we don’t get so engulfed by this deeply embedded culture that we lose sight of some important core values. The two values I believe are most at risk from this environment are sportsmanship and the dogs themselves.

Here is an example of how this ingrained culture can impact sportsmanship. A friend of mine was recently marshaling at a field trial. He watched as a good dog and handler ran into some problems on the water blinds so they were dropped from the competition that day. As the dog and handler passed him to leave the grounds my friends said he was sorry they had been dropped.

Another competitor, sitting in the gallery, overheard my friend’s condolences and challenged him on his sincerity. The other competitor said he didn’t think my friend meant what he said because “we are all here only to win.” My friend told the other exhibitor he truly felt bad for the person that was dropped. However, my friend failed to convince the other exhibitor his feelings were genuine.

It is truly sad when someone can’t be happy for someone else because they won. Or, show compassion for others on those days when things do not go well. There is nothing wrong with having tried but failed yet our culture says it is not acceptable to lose.

I think this example of poor sportsmanship stems from some people’s never-ending appetite for winning. An appetite for winning that can be so great it creates a tremendous amount of self-inflicted pressure which can result in poor behaviors aimed at other

people. Sadly, this appetite can also result in other negative behaviors such as valuing higher wins over higher learning or winning without truly earning it. I've also noticed how this culture, when at its worst, can cause splits between friends when one person (or both) places winning over friendship.

Personally, I am most bothered when dogs pay the price for a person's appetite for winning at any cost. I am bothered when young dogs are pushed really hard because of an owner's self-imposed deadline to beat someone else's record. I'm bothered by severely punishing dogs that fail to perform beyond their capabilities because the owner wants a certain win. I am bothered by the physical tolls on dogs such as blown cruciate ligament or joint injuries when pushed too hard because the owner just had to finish a title. I am bothered by dogs that rarely get to be home or just bed dogs sometimes because of the need for another big win. And I am bothered by people who get rid of dogs that don't win. None of which seems fair to me – to place a win over the dog's individual well being. However, I imagine not everyone would agree with my list of unfair consequences to a dog and might say that is what it takes to win.

This is not to say that one cannot strive to reach ambitious goals and be competitive with their dogs. There is nothing wrong with being competitive in sports. I set multiple goals for my two Golden Retrievers every year and I like to think we are competitive. However (and here is the key), not at the expense of other people or my dogs.

Please stop, step outside yourself for just a moment and look at how the American culture impacts you, sportsmanship and our beloved Golden Retrievers. Then try to keep your training and competition in proper perspective.

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Susan has given us some food for thought.

Until next time, happy training!

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