

From Behind the Line

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In the previous column, I talked about accepting my first licensed Hunt Test judging request. Although I have judged many club trials, this was truly a fun experience! My thanks to my co-judge and friend, Bob May, and the Bootheel Retriever Club for making the test weekend a very enjoyable experience. The weather was almost perfect (we had a little rain Sunday morning) and the club did great job of keeping things running with few glitches.

Bob and I were pleased see how many different breeds of retrievers were participating. When I started playing this game, most of the participants had Labradors—black, some yellow—although occasionally you would see a Golden or a Chessie or a chocolate Labrador (that was my dog!). We had the privilege of judging Labradors (all three colors), Golden Retrievers, Chesapeake Bay Retrievers, Flat Coated Retrievers, Standard Poodles and Irish Water Spaniels. The only breed of dog approved for participation in the AKC Hunt Tests that was missing was the Curly Coated Retriever. It is great to see such diversity in the field!

It was fun to see the excitement and anxiety of the first-time participants at the Junior level. You are more likely to see first-time handlers with first-time dogs at the Junior level. We had 57 entries (a very large Junior entry) so the logistics were a challenge. When you have that many dogs, you hope for few “no-birds” and for a good marshal to keep the dogs and handlers coming to the line.

Our marshal did a great job keeping us supplied with a steady stream of entrants. We weren't so lucky on the “no-bird” side of things! The Junior test we set up was limited by the land options we had. The natural cover of the grounds was thick and deep—cover that even experienced Master level dogs would have trouble with. Therefore, it was critical that the live fliers and the control birds drop in designated areas of short cover so the young or inexperienced Junior dogs could be successful. We set up the land marks for the Junior dogs so that the dogs had to run through some deep cover, but the birds dropped into open areas of short cover. This way, if the dog drove through the deeper cover and established a hunt in the area of the fall, the dog would be successful.

However, to maintain this landing area for the live flier, the gunners had a limited area in which to drop the bird. If the duck was hit but sailed too far before landing, it would land in heavy cover. No bird. If the gunners missed the bird entirely, then the duck could escape into the heavy cover, or fly down the hill to the pond we had to use for our water marks in the afternoon. No bird. The gunners had just a little pressure on them to drop those ducks fast!

Normally, the no-birds are sprinkled throughout the test, affecting several different dogs. Unfortunately, for this test, we had one handler who was the unlucky recipient of FOUR no-birds on the land flier and another handler who was the recipient of THREE no-birds on the land flier.

The first handler was a small woman with a large, pretty Golden. She maintained her cool and her dog was under control. Finally, on her fifth time to the line for the flier (her

dog had already successfully picked up the control bird), she got a duck that fell into the short cover and her dog did a nice job of retrieving it. At the end of the day when the club was handing out ribbons to the qualifiers, she told us that this was not only her first qualifying ribbon but also her first hunt test! We gave her the judges' "gold star award" for maintaining her cool under pressure, and for doing such a good job of handling her dog in a very difficult situation. Your first no-bird can be an almost frightening experience, especially when you are a novice and aren't sure of what is expected. You have to pull your dog off the line and away from the missed bird, then you have to return to the line with a dog that has already seen the setup and could be very excited. You have to maintain your wits about you and keep the dog under control. Pretty nerve-wracking! I still get butterflies going to the line and probably always will.

There is a new rule in AKC Hunt Test regulations as of September 1, 2000 which requires Junior handlers to carry a gun for at least one series, while Senior and Master handlers must handle a gun in all series except the honor and the blinds. This makes sense for the Senior and Master events because the dogs work off-leash and it adds more realism to the hunting scenario. Prior to this ruling, Senior and Master handlers often had to handle the gun while giving hand signals to the dog during a blind retrieve—not an easy task I can tell you! So this change in the rules will be a good thing at the higher levels. However, we discovered as judges that it could be quite a complication for Junior handlers. Most Junior handlers will bring their dogs to the line on-leash and will then either remove the leash and hold the dog's collar or remove the leash and loop it around the dog's neck or through the collar to use as a slip cord. This means the handlers already have their hands full. We had the handlers picking up the gun at the holding blind as they walked to the line. That meant they had to struggle with handling the gun while they prepared their leash/collar/dog for running. Bob and I agreed that the next time either of us judges a Junior stake, we will hand the gun to the handler **after** all the preparation at the line is done, just before we signal for the birds. This is an added complication at the Junior level that will take some getting used to.

It was truly fun to be able to watch all the dogs run in each stake. As a handler, you get to see a few dogs run, but normally not all of them. The judge's view is a great one! It is a challenge to diagram out all the series and take notes while watching the performance of each dog, but I was glad that I had taken the time on those details. At the end of each day when the tests had been completed, I had several handlers come up and ask about their performance--dog and handler--and what they need to improve. Those notes and diagrams were really helpful so I could refresh my memory and explain to the handlers what we saw. With 57 Junior dogs on Saturday and 48 Senior dogs on Sunday, it was impossible to remember each dog's performance unaided.

It was also very helpful for me as a handler to be on the other side, behind the line. It gave me some insight into what judges are looking for and how I can improve my skills as a handler. I got to watch how pros approach the test compared to less experienced handlers. And I got to evaluate some of my own past experiences and advice I had received. For example, we are all advised when we start running at the Senior level that "you only get one handle!" and that you should handle your dog on a mark only as

a last resort. This stems from the guidelines that state the double retrieves at the Senior level are marking tests and should be judged as such. Section 3, Senior Hunting Tests, point (5) states that “Dogs may be handled on a mark 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.” It does NOT say that the dogs cannot or should not be handled to a mark.

As a judge or as you hunting partner, I don't want to see a dog that is running all over the county to find a bird. A good hunt in the area of the fall is one thing. But, in my opinion, a big, long hunt all over the place shows signs of either poor marking skills, lack of self-confidence in the dog, lack of training, or lack of good decision-making on the part of the handler. There are times when handling a dog to the mark is the best decision for the circumstances. It may be the weather conditions hampering scenting, or really difficult cover or the dog is just having a bad day. That is what makes this game so challenging—sending the dog is only part of the puzzle. You have to evaluate each situation, dog and circumstance and make the best decisions you can. That's hard to do with butterflies in your stomach and wobbly knees!

All in all, it was a positive, fun experience for me. I hope I will be invited to judge for other clubs so I can continue to improve my judging and handling skills. In the meantime, the training for next year continues—along with some pheasant and duck hunting.

Happy Training!

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