



## ASK THE PRO

### preparing for the master national

By Angie Becker

WHEN I WAS ASKED to do an article for the “Ask the Pro” column in regards to preparing for the Master National, I thought I wouldn’t have enough to talk about. Once I made an outline I realized I could run over my 1000-1500 word limit. Being prepared for the big event is a culmination of many little things done up to a year in advance. They’re not overly time consuming but when addressed in a timely fashion you allow yourself the luxury of being ready and relaxed once you get to the grounds; making sure your T’s are crossed I’s are dotted.

**First off, you need to do your research by getting to know your judges.** All judges have their favorite set-ups that they more often than not use weekend in and weekend out. Be prepared to run part if not all of their favorite set-ups. Know how they score and what their personal preferences are. Also know how they interpret the rules. Learn how to showcase your dog to the best advantage when running under those judges. There are certain things

each judge likes to see in the performance of the handler and dog. If given the opportunity, try and seek out these judges and run under them so you have the advantage of gathering as much information about them while they’re in the chair behind you. File these notes away for safe keeping.

**Analyze your dog.** No dog is perfect, especially a young or quirky dog. These dogs will demand more from you as a handler. What are your dog’s strengths and weaknesses? Will they need more training before the event or less? In general, I like to tighten them up around the water and emphasize key concepts and I like to start working on what the slate of judges like to see in the way of set-ups. This happens about a month or so before the event. Is your dog physically fit and mentally relaxed? Both are paramount for success. An out of shape dog that’s apprehensive over its training before the test is a recipe for disaster. The same can be said about the handler.

**Don’t over train.** I think this is the num-

ber one misconception by trainers, amateur and pro’s alike. A relaxed dog makes good decisions come test time. Tired, stressed, over trained dogs rarely do well, because let’s face it, “The Hay is In the Barn” already. You’re not going to teach them anything new now. Your job as a trainer is to enhance and compliment what your dog already has in place. The hard work has been done.

**Have your training grounds and group in place at least two (2) months before the national.** Have your birds ordered and your equipment lined up. Make sure everyone knows the role they play in the group and what equipment they need to bring. Communicate often before the arrival time so things are orchestrated smoothly once you start training. Nothing is more stressful than a fly by the seat of your pants training group. I might also add that the accommodations you make for yourself are important too. You and your dog are a team at the line and you both should be comfortable and well rested. Don’t opt for a last

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minute hotel room an hour away that's cheap. Stay close and stay comfortable.

During the event, especially the earlier part of the week, there will be quite a bit of down-time. Don't leave your dog in its crate or box for hours on end. Take them out for long walks many times during the day and a good game of tug of war wouldn't hurt either. There's a lot of excitement and stress for them during those two (2) weeks so it's important to find a way for them to unwind. They need it and so do you.

As handlers you need to be mentally pre-

pared for all outcomes at the line. Intended and anticipated. Have your plan A, B, C, and D in place before going to the line and watch as many dogs as you can before you run. Your dog, more than likely, will perform the same way. Have your plans ready and be ready to execute them.

***Rein in those nerves. Focus...*** Don't throw away your chance at the line because your nerves got the better of you. Your dog needs you there to drive. You expect your dog to give 110% come game day, you must do the

same. Nerves are not a reason for you failing the team. Find ways to work on this before the Master National or any other event you might run. ■

## Tioga Retrievers Angie Becker

Angie Becker has been training field dogs since 1989 and dogs in obedience since she was 16. Many dogs that have been trained by Tioga Retrievers have competed and qualified in all three levels of the AKC and UKC hunt test programs.