

About AKC-Licensed Field Trials for Retrievers

**By David Wallace for *The Retriever News.com*
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AKC-Licensed Retriever Field Trials are the major leagues for working retrievers. A truly accomplished retriever excelling at this level can consistently perform at a very high level in any hunting or retrieving situation or testing to which he is exposed on a reasonably consistent basis.

FIELD TRIAL TESTS AND JUDGING THE DOGS

The AKC Standard Procedure for Non-Slip Retrievers states: "The purpose of a Non-Slip Retriever trial is to determine the relative merits of Retrievers in the field.

"The function of a Non-Slip Retriever is to seek and retrieve "fallen" game when ordered to do so. He should sit quietly on line or in the blind, walk at heel, or assume any station designated by his handler until sent to retrieve. When ordered, a dog should retrieve quickly and briskly without unduly disturbing too much ground, and should deliver tenderly to hand. He should then await further orders.

"Accurate marking is of primary importance. A dog which marks the fall of a bird, uses the wind, follows a strong cripple, and will take direction from his handler is of great value."

Section 22 of the "STANDARD" states:

"The Judges must judge the dogs for (a) their natural abilities, including their memory, intelligence, attention, nose, courage, perseverance and style, and (b) their abilities acquired through training, including steadiness, control, response to direction and delivery." Natural abilities are of great importance in all stakes, whereas abilities acquired through training are of less importance in the Qualifying stake than in those carrying championship points, and are of comparatively minor importance in the Derby stake (see below). Dogs should be tested equally on land and water. Each field trial stake is judged by two judges. There are experience requirements that must be met by each pair of judges with somewhat more experience required in the major stakes than the minor stakes (see below). Good field trial judges will plan their marking tests so that it will be difficult for a dog to negotiate the route to the "area of the fall" unless the dog has marked and remembers the location of the fall, and has the desire, intelligence, courage, perseverance and style to negotiate that difficult route to the bird. In setting up these tests good judges will take advantage of wind direction and intensity, rolling terrain, terraces, variations of sparse and heavy cover, small and large bushes, trees, logs, fallen branches, ditches, hay bales and other natural obstacles on land. For tests on the water, good judges will take advantage of these same features as well as irregular-shaped shorelines, points of land, islands, sand bars, channels, winding creeks, and other natural obstacles in the water. In testing a dog's marking ability good judges will set up tests to insure that an attentive dog will clearly see the falls of all the birds shot. It is difficult to test a dog's marking ability if he is not given a reasonable opportunity to see the fall of the bird, therefore it is customary in field trials for gunners to wear white jackets since some of the falls can be a considerable distance from the line. The background and lighting conditions of the fall are also important factors to which judges should pay special attention. A blind retrieve is a test of control and the same planning should go into designing these tests. Taking advantage of the same natural obstacles used in marking tests will make it difficult for a dog to negotiate the route to the "fall" unless he is under control and responds to direction from his handler. As with marking tests, it is difficult to test a dog's response to direction from a considerable distance if he cannot see the hand and arm signals of his handler, therefore it is customary in field trials for handlers to wear white jackets when handling their dogs. While it is important that retriever field trials should "simulate as nearly as possible the conditions met in an ordinary day's shoot", it must be remembered that the purpose of field trials are "to determine the relative merits of Retrievers in the field." Therefore, at this level of competition, field trial conditions must extend beyond the "conditions met in an ordinary day's shoot" while still approximating "natural hunting conditions." Many duties required of a retriever in a real-life hunting situation are in reality taken for granted in an accomplished field trial retriever and many more demands are made of his abilities and talents in field trial competition. Therefore, marking tests and blind retrieves required of competitive field trial retrievers are greatly expanded from those experienced by a retriever and his handler "in an ordinary day's shoot." AKC retriever field trial Field Champions are members of an elite group of retrievers that must be acknowledged as "the cream of the crop" by every knowledgeable retriever enthusiast. To earn a Field Championship a retriever must defeat Field Champions and dogs from all of the retriever breeds, unlike a bench Champion who is not required to defeat Champions or dogs of other breeds to earn his breed conformation Championship title (see below). The discussion of the dedication, years of training, and selective breeding required for a retriever to join this elite group, however, goes far beyond the scope of this general description of AKC-Licensed Retriever Field Trials!

STAKES AT AKC-LICENSED FIELD TRIALS

AKC-licensed field trials for retrievers are open to all the retriever breeds (Labrador, Golden, Chesapeake, Flat-Coated, Curly-Coated) and Irish Water Spaniels. All of the breeds will be referred to as "retrievers" in this discussion. The four stakes at AKC-licensed retriever field trials are:

Major Stakes:

1. **OPEN ALL-AGE** (Also Limited All-Age and Special All-Age, but will be referred to as Open All-Age)
2. **AMATEUR ALL-AGE** (Also Owner-Handler Amateur All-Age, but will be referred to as Amateur All-Age)

Minor Stakes:

3. **QUALIFYING**
4. **DERBY** Championship points are earned in the two major stakes, the Open All-Age and the Amateur All-Age. However, the discussion of the stakes will begin with the two minor stakes, the Derby and Qualifying stakes.

The Derby Stake

The Derby stake is for retrievers under two years of age. A "reasonable" degree of steadiness and general obedience are the requirements in the Derby stake. Marking ability and style constitute the most important factors for placings in the Derby. Blind retrieves are not required in the Derby stake. Usually retrieves are limited to single marks and double marks. The most common Derby test would be a double with the guns remaining visible. Only on rare occasions judges have required retrieves of marks from which gunners retire (hide) after the bird has been shot. Also on rare occasions judges have required the retrieving of triple marks. There are usually four series, or tests, with two series being run on land and two series on water.

"Derby" Points are awarded in the Derby Stake as follows:

First Place - 5 Points

Second Place - 3 Points

Third Place - 2 Points

Fourth Place - 1 Point

Annually, the dog earning the most Derby points in the country during his "Derby career" is designated to be the "High-Point Derby Dog". (This is sometimes referred to, in error, as "The National Derby Champion"). Although this designation is not officially recognized by the American Kennel Club, it is a prestigious "designation" recognized by the retriever field trial sport and is administered by the *Retriever Field Trial News (RFTN)*. Dogs are also recognized as "Top Ten Derby Dogs" (ranking in the top ten dogs in the country for Derby points earned) and those making the "Derby List" (dogs that accumulate ten or more derby points appear on that list). (The *Retriever Field Trial News*, published ten times during the year, is owned by the National Retriever Club and the National Amateur Retriever Club, the organizations that hold the two annual National Championship stakes licensed by the American Kennel Club. The various local retriever clubs in the country are member-clubs of these two organizations. The RFTN publishes results of all AKC-Licensed Field Trials and also contains advertisements and articles related to the retriever field trial sport. In the last several years the RFTN has also published results of AKC-Licensed Hunting Tests.)

The Qualifying Stake

The Qualifying Stake is open to all dogs who have not won two Qualifying Stakes, have not received a Judges Award of Merit in the Open All-Age Stake, and have not received a placement in the Amateur All-Age Stake. The most common marking tests in a Qualifying Stake are triple retrieves with all guns visible, even though retired gunners (who hide after the bird is shot) are often used. Blind retrieves are also required in the Qualifying Stake, although abilities acquired through training are of less importance in the Qualifying stake than in those carrying championship points. The status recognized as "Qualified All-Age" allows a dog to be eligible to run a "Limited All-Age Stake", which, at some field trials with large entries, is an "Open All-Age Stake" that "limits" the entry to "Qualified All-Age" dogs. A dog placing first or second in a Qualifying Stake is recognized as "Qualified All-Age." (A dog may also become "Qualified All-Age" by receiving a Judges Award of Merit or better in a major stake.)

The Open All-Age Stake

Championship points are awarded in the Open All-Age Stake, which is open to all retrievers eligible for an AKC-licensed retriever field trial. Tests consist of demanding marks and blinds and only accomplished retrievers of extraordinary natural and trained abilities usually excel in the Open All-Age Stake. Tests commonly consist of triple or quadruple marks, with and without retired guns (hidden after the bird is shot), and single, double or triple blind retrieves. Dogs must be steady and under control at all times. The Open All-Age stakes commonly begins with a marking test on land followed by a land test with at least one blind retrieve. Dogs "called back" after the land tests are usually required to successfully perform a blind retrieve on the water which would be followed by a marking test on the water. At field trials which have large entries it is common to have a "Limited All-Age", which is the same as an "Open All-Age" stake but entries are "limited" to those dogs who are "Qualified All-Age." A field trial may also have a "Special All-Age" stake to further restrict entries. To be qualified to run a Special All-Age a dog must have received a Judges Award of Merit in a major stake or placed first or second in a Qualifying Stake in the current year or the preceding calendar year. The prestigious High-Point Open Dog Award is presented annually to the dog earning the most points in the Open All-Age Stake at AKC-Licensed Field Trials during the year.

The Amateur All-Age Stake

Championship points earned toward the Amateur Field Championship are awarded in the Amateur All-Age Stake and the performance requirements are basically the same as in the Open All-Age stake. The main difference between the two stakes is that only amateur handlers are allowed to handle dogs in the Amateur Stake, whereas professionals and amateurs may handle dogs in the Open All-Age stake. Trial-giving clubs have the option of holding an Amateur All-Age or an Owner-Handler Amateur All-Age. In a regular Amateur All-Age Stake the dog may be handled by any amateur handler. In an Owner-Handler Amateur All-Age the dog may be handled only by the registered owner (and certain relatives), and only if the owner (or relative) is an amateur. (An amateur is a person who, for at least one year, has not earned any part of his or her livelihood from the training of a dog for hunting or field trial competition and/or from the handling of a dog in field trial competition at any level.) The prestigious High-Point Amateur Dog Award is presented annually to the dog earning the most points in the Amateur All-Age Stake at AKC-Licensed Field Trials during the year.

CHAMPIONSHIP TITLES

The American Kennel Club awards these championship titles:

1. **CHAMPION (CH)** This title is awarded for points earned for exemplary breed conformation at AKC Bench Shows.
2. **OBEDIENCE TRIAL CHAMPION (OTC)** This title is awarded for points earned at AKC Obedience Trials.
3. **FIELD CHAMPION (FC)** This title is awarded for points earned for field working abilities in the Open All-Age Stake at AKC-LICENSED FIELD TRIALS for various breeds
4. **AMATEUR FIELD CHAMPION (AFC)** This title is awarded for points earned for field working abilities in the Amateur All-Age Stake at AKC-LICENSED FIELD TRIALS for various breeds. It is also awarded for points earned in the Open All-Age Stake, but only when the dog is handled by an Amateur (as opposed to a professional trainer/handler).
5. **CHAMPION TRACKER (CT)**
6. **HERDING CHAMPION (HC)** The American Kennel Club now also recognizes National Championship titles National Field Champion (NFC) and National Amateur Field Champion (NAFC). Previously these were "designations" instead of titles in the eyes of AKC. If a dog earns two of the first three titles listed (CH, OTC, FC) he shall be designated a DUAL CHAMPION (DC, previously DUAL CH). If a dog earns all three of the first three titles listed (CH, OTC, FC) he shall be designated a TRIPLE CHAMPION (TC, previously TRIPLE CH). AKC championship titles appear as a prefix to a dog's registered name (CH Shamrock Acres Light Brigade, DUAL CH Hiwood Shadow, FC Westwind's Chances Are, FC-AFC Itchin' Gretchin, AFC Westwinds Pedro). The two National championship stakes licensed by the American Kennel Club are the National Open Retriever Championship Stake and the National Amateur Retriever Championship Stake. The winner of the National Open Retriever Championship stake shall be designated the "National Retriever Field Champion of 19--" and the winner of the National Amateur Retriever Championship stake shall be designated the "National Amateur Retriever Field Champion of 19--". Although designations are not official championship titles of the American Kennel Club, it is customary in the sport to recognize the National Champions as NFC or NAFC (NFC-AFC Dynamite Duke IV, NFC-NAFC Candlewood's Super Tanker, NAFC-FC Dude's Double or Nothin', NFC-DUAL CH Shed of Arden, NFC-NAFC Super Chief, NFC Mi-Cris Sailor). Titles other than championship titles earned by AKC-registered dogs include Master Hunter (MH), Senior Hunter (SH), Junior Hunter (JH), Companion Dog and Companion Dog Excellent (CD and CDX), Utility Dog and Utility Dog Excellent (UD and UDX), and Tracking Dog and Tracking Dog Excellent (TD and TDX). Also VST - Variable Surface Tracker, HT - Herding Tested, PT - Pre-Trial Tested, HS - Herding Started, HI - Herding Intermediate, HX - Herding Excellent, JC - Junior Courseur, SC - Senior Courseur, NA - Novice Agility, OA - Open Agility, AX - Agility Excellent, MX - Master Agility, JE - Junior Earthdog, SE - Senior Earthdog, ME - Master Earthdog. These titles appear as a suffix to the dog's registered name (Southwind's Reuben James MH, Skyrocket Packaged Deal CD, Lura's Excavator JH CDX TDX). Other designations for retrievers are those awarded by the AKC-member National breed clubs (Labrador Retriever Club, Golden Retriever Club of America, American Chesapeake Club, The Flat-Coated Retriever Society of America, etc.) for working abilities, the working certificate and working certificate excellent (WC and WCX). These designations normally appear as a suffix to the dog's registered name (Twin Branch Wistful Widgeon WC).

CHAMPIONSHIP POINTS

Championship points are awarded to dogs placing in the Open All-Age and the Amateur All-Age stakes, as follows:

First Place - 5 Points

Second Place - 3 Points

Third Place - 1 Point

Fourth Place - 1/2 Point

To attain the title Field Champion as dog must earn ten points in the Open All-Age Stake, of which five points must be for a first place. If the dog is handled by an Amateur handler in the Open All-Age Stake, that dog also attains the title of Amateur Field Champion with points earned in the Open All-Age Stake. To attain the title of Amateur Field Champion with points earned in the Amateur All-Age, a retriever must earn fifteen points, of which five must be for a first place. Open All-Age points combined with Amateur All-Age points also count toward the fifteen points required for the Amateur Field Championship.

NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP QUALIFICATIONS

To qualify for the National Open Retriever Championship or the National Amateur Retriever Championship a dog must have a 5-point win plus two other points during the year preceding the annual championship stake. Points earned toward qualification for the National Open must be earned in the Open All-Age Stake. Points earned toward qualification for the National Amateur must be earned in the Amateur All-Age stake, or the Open All-Age stake if the dog is handled by an Amateur handler. The National Amateur Championship is held in June every year and the National Open Championship is held in November every year. The site of the National championships are rotated to each of the four time zones every four years.