

Judging the AREA of

WE START WITH THIS ADMONITION. Judge marking ability according to the Rules. It is a poor “convention” for Judges to consider as an excellent mark only those pinpointed by a retriever.

A retriever that goes to the “area of the fall,” hunts and finds the bird, has exhibited an excellent mark. It should not be appreciably outscored² by a dog which put its nose on the mark without a hunt. (Rules, p. 50.)

Let’s be fair in scoring those dogs that go to the “area of the fall” and quickly find the bird without pinpointing it. This kind of mark is the essence of a good retriever. For this reason, the geographic area known as the “area of the fall” deserves discussion.

A dog that misses the “fall” on the first cast, but recognizes the depth of the “area of the fall,” stays in it, then quickly and systematically “hunts-it-out,” has done both a credible and an intelligent job of marking. Such work should not be appreciably outscored by the dog that “finds” and “pinpoints” on his first cast. The word, “appreciably,” means that the difference in the scores of pinpointing dogs and dogs that go to the “area” and quickly hunt and find the bird should be slight. However, a dog which consistently, for example, during and entire stake, marks his birds in a closer area, hence, more accurately than another dog, should be judged accordingly. All things are relative, and, conceivably, such differences in markings alone can be sufficient to determine the final placings in a particular stake.” (Rules, p. 50.)

WOW. Read that last sentence again! The key there happens to be the words ... “can be.” The qualifying words suggest that there are likely to be intervening factors which must be considered along with marking ability. These factors in the Rules are minor, moderate and severe faults, some of which require elimination. Marking ability remains the paramount skill sought in retrievers. The faults concerning the “area of the fall” mentioned in the Rules are:

1. “Failure to mark the ‘area of the fall’ requiring that the dog be handled to the bird; worse on the first bird retrieved than on subsequent birds.”
2. “Disturbing too much cover either by not going to the area or by leaving it.” (Rules, pp. 57-58.)

These are moderate faults and most Judges will tolerate two of them prior to dropping a dog from further consideration.



the FALL¹

By Dennis Bath & Francis Keenan



Judging the Area of the Fall

“What precisely constitutes the “area of the ‘fall’” defies accurate definition; yet, at the outset of every test, each Judge must arbitrarily define its hypothetical boundaries for himself or herself, and for each bird in that test, so that he/she can judge whether dogs have remained within a concept of “area of the ‘fall,’” as well as how far they have wandered away from “the area” and how much cover they have disturbed unnecessarily. In determining these boundaries of the “area of the ‘fall,’” due considerations should be given to various factors: (1) the type, the height and the uniformity of the cover, (2) light conditions, (3) direction of the prevailing wind and its intensity, (4) length of various falls, (5) the speed of individual dogs, (6) whether there is a change in cover (as from stubble to plowed ground, or to ripe alfalfa [or clover, or whether wet conditions have affected scenting], or to machine-picked corn, etc.) or whether the “fall” is beyond a hedge, across a road, or over a ditch, etc., and, and most important, (7) whether one is establishing the “area of the ‘fall’” for a single, or for the first bird a dog goes for, in multiple retrieves, or for the second or third bird, since each of these should differ from the others.” (Rules, pp. 50-51.)

The words from the Rules in the definition of the “area of the ‘fall’” which immediately imprint upon one are that it is “arbitrary, “hypothetical,” and that it “defies description.” In other words, there is no set formula for describing an “area of the fall.” Each mark presents issues. Judges seldom enter into a conversation with a co-Judge about the boundaries for the areas of the ‘falls’ prior to the start of the stake. In fact, few Judges draw such an area in their books. It becomes a clear matter when a dog has gone directly to the “area of the fall,” or, when a dog is well out of an imaginary “area of the ‘fall.’”

The “area of the fall” should be visible to the Judges and handlers. When the Judges cannot see the “area of the fall,” they also cannot see: a fast pickup (style); the dog arrive there and ‘smash’ the mark; or, hunt it; they cannot see a “pop,” a “blink,” a slow pickup, or other faults that may be committed when the dog is not visible. What kind of mark is that? When a handler cannot see the “area of the fall,” that handler cannot see when a dog tries to leave that “area” prior to finding the bird and when a handle might be the handler’s choice. This is clearly an unfair situation. The “area of the fall” must be visible on all marks.

There are times when a difficult mark, as proven by the number of dogs which have either failed it or hunted extensively to find the bird, must be judged carefully. All such hunts are not failures even when parts of the hunts are outside the “area of the fall.” Judges must decide whether a dog’s extensive hunt merits consideration for perseverance, as that trait is an admirable one in a retriever. Ask these questions: did a number of dogs have difficulty with the mark? How much of the hunt was in the area of the fall? How far from the “area of the fall” did the dog hunt and how often? Had the dog gone directly on its first cast to the “area of the ‘fall’”? “Did the handler, seeing that the dog was not going directly to the “area of the ‘fall,’” handle the dog quickly and effectively to that area? Did the handler let the dog that did not go to the “area of the fall” hunt well out of it for some time prior to handling (failure to mark)? Did the handler fail to handle simply letting the dog hunt extensively outside the “area” until it eventually found the bird? (failure to mark.) Were the handles crisp and did they carry the dog to the bird; did the dog receive numerous casts prior to finding the bird? The answers to these questions, in such circumstances as mentioned, will lead the Judges to an appropriate score for a dog or to a decision to eliminate it.

“When ordered, a dog should retrieve quickly and briskly (style)

without unduly disturbing too much ground.” (Rules, p. 41.)

An inference in this passage is that a straight line is NOT the standard for evaluation when a dog is sent to an “area of the ‘fall.’” “This is an important distinction. Judge straight lines on blind retrieves. ‘Unduly’ means without excessive disturbance of ground, inappropriate or unjustifiable routing or delay. Poor throws, bad backgrounds, lighting, and poor positioning of the thrower (they should always be conspicuous) can increase the size of the area of the fall. Hunts may be wider and deeper when such factors are encountered.

Judges should have in mind an “area of the fall” large enough to accommodate a long flier. Sometimes these fliers drop “in” toward the line. Retrievers normally hunt wide and deeper, and not “in” toward the line. “In” fliers are difficult and almost always out of the “area of the fall.” A retriever that hunts and finds an “in” flier should receive credit for persevering and for an intelligent hunt and not be scored low for this hunt. In fact, during a long hunt on an “in” flier without a find, the Judges should call it a “no bird” (which it was in the first place) and furnish a re-run.

“Dogs which disturb cover unnecessarily, clearly well out of the area of the ‘fall,’ either by not going directly to that area, or by leaving it, even though they eventually find the bird without being handled, should be penalized more severely than those handled quickly and obediently to it” (Rules, p. 51.)

The word “directly” may be interpreted in several ways. For Judges, it means ... instantly or right away, or, with dispatch. It should be interpreted to mean ... a route to the “area of the fall” that is not roundabout or interrupted. “Factors such as terrain, bushes, trees, large rocks or boulders, ditches, wind, and the like can alter the line to the “area of the ‘fall.’” A dog should not meander away from an otherwise clear path or display a slow pace or lack of interest. Dogs should not falter (move unsteadily) and there should be no hesitation in action or purpose as the dogs move toward the “area of the ‘fall.’” These caveats are well understood by most Judges who from experience have learned to judge the “area of the ‘fall’” and not the route to it, at least in most circumstances. There are, of course exceptions and good Judges respond appropriately by using common sense.

With respect to pheasant fliers³, we recommend that they not be used in tests that have tight lines to other “areas of the falls.” Pheasants are very fast out of hand or a launcher and thereby increase the size of the “area of the fall.” Pheasant fliers and tight marks will produce “no birds” when the fall is too close or in another “area of the fall.” This factor, pheasant fliers, causes even tighter lines to other birds in the test. Remember also that hen pheasants launched from a bird thrower, especially at long distances, are difficult for dogs to see effectively because the hens fly so fast and will be well beyond the launcher before the sounds of the shots reach the line. A dog that turns its head from another fall to a hen pheasant flier a little late may never see the bird.

The use of mechanical launchers to throw birds is always a matter to be carefully considered by the Judges: how far from the line was the launcher? At a considerable distance, the thrown bird is all ready falling toward the ground before the sound of a gun reaches the line. Launchers should not be used at distances much over 125 yards from the line. Since dogs react to motion, it is appropriate for the operator of the launcher to make a throwing motion prior to shooting and releasing the launcher.

One good situation is the use of a launcher for a dead bird throw. The launcher will land each bird in approximately the same small area thereby consolidating “the area of the fall” and reducing the number of “no-birds.” This use of launchers resolves the issue of dead birds poorly thrown, some quite short or too low, or others off line or too

far, thereby creating a different “area of the fall” for dogs experiencing these bad throws.

In general, the “area of the ‘fall’ “for a single should be relatively small; the area for a first retrieve in a “double” should be smaller than for the second bird, and both of these should be larger in a “triple,” and larger still for the last bird in a “quad.” “The area” for short retrieves should certainly be smaller than for longer retrieves. There are so many conditions and variables to be taken into consideration. It is obvious that each Judge, and for every series, must attempt to define for himself/herself a hypothetical “area of the ‘fall’ “for each bird, and then judge the dogs accordingly. The penalties assessed should vary in their severity, depending on the distance which individual dogs wander out of the “area,” the frequency of such wanderings, the number of birds miss-marked in a given test, and by the amount of cover disturbed in these meanderings. When dogs commit faults as described, i.e., wander aimlessly outside the “area of the fall” and never in it, and disturb too much cover, they have failed to mark the bird!

Most Judges learn to accurately assess the behavior of the dogs by carefully observing their actions. For example, a dog that goes into the “area of the ‘fall’ “on the upwind side and quickly finds the bird obviously had a mark. On the other hand, one that goes wide of the “area of the ‘fall’ “on the downwind side, scents the bird, and then recovers it, may not have had a mark at all. Remember that judging the “area of the ‘fall’ “is about the paramount trait that Judges are seeking in retrievers and that is ... **marking ability**.

There are physical elements that affect the size of the “area of the fall.” An early number on a rainy, cold or dew-filled morning, especially in an alfalfa or clover field, will cause scent conditions for the dogs to be poor. As the day commences and the grass dries, the scenting conditions will improve. Light conditions can vary greatly during a series thereby creating poor visibility, especially for distant falls. Judges must consider these conditions when deciding the boundaries of the “area of the fall.” By logical extension, we suggest that the “area of a fall” may change during the series due to the natural elements present in a test. An example for which Judges should always be alert is a wind direction change. It can effect how a Judge will score a mark.

We also endorse latitude in Judges’ minds when it comes to a fast and powerful dog sent to retrieve a short bird, gunners retired, which is increasingly difficult with a standout gunner or live flier shot behind it. For the fast, energetic, power dog, the kind Judges seek and respect for their style, the “area of the fall” should have larger parameters than for slow moving dogs.

Should the “area of the fall” be reduced in size, irrespective of the order of the fall, when the gunner remains visible? The answer is YES! Dogs should drive to that area without difficulty. An exception is a mark thrown at great distance with a standout thrower. Distance will increase the size of the “area of the fall” as the length of the retrieve increases. Dogs, like humans, do not see as well at distance. If they can identify the “area of the fall” and get to it quickly and find the bird, they have performed a very good mark.

Dogs that have been “unsighted” for some time during a retrieve and terrain has caused them to lose their line, will not see the “area of the fall” again until clearing the low places that “unsighted” them. It is then that a decision about where to go is made by a dog. Judges should be alert to which direction a dog takes at this critical moment. Did the dog correct its path and run toward the “area of the fall? Did the dog continue on a path that did not take it to the “area of the fall?” Answers to these questions partly determine whether the dog marked the “fall” of the bird. Generally, when the path to a bird causes the dogs to be “unsighted” for a period of time, the “area of the fall” is larger in the minds

of the Judges, especially when the bird fell at a considerable distance from the line.

When guns are retired, Judges must determine whether the “area of the fall” extends behind the gun position. It is not unusual for Judges to decide that the “area of the fall” is larger when the guns are retired. Ask yourself this question: if a dog runs behind a gun station when the bird thrower is not retired and receives penalties for hunting there, why shouldn’t this event (running behind the gun station and hunting there) be penalized when the bird thrower is retired? Other questions: did the dog indicate a mark by swinging around the retired gun station and into the “area of the fall” quickly and without wind assistance? Did the dog behind the gun station turn away from where the bird fell and go elsewhere? How extensively did the dog hunt on either side of a gun station? Was the path the dog took one that was not directly toward the “area of the fall” and then go to it when assisted by the wind (failure to mark the “area”). Was a short throw responsible for extending the “area” behind the gun station? Answers to these questions will put to rest questions about a dog going behind a gun station, which is really irrelevant, and will assist Judges in making scoring decisions.

Considerations for the “area of the fall” and water marks are:

- (1) How close to the water was the fall?
- (2) Was the fall in the water and close to land?
- (3) Was the throw from land to land across water?
- (4) Was the throw from a boat; was the boat along the shore or out in open water? Was the boat in open water anchored to keep it stationary?
- (5) For a bird thrown into open water, was there any current to move the bird from where it fell? Was there vegetation in the water to keep the bird from moving away from where it fell?
- (6) Was a bird thrown from a boat onto shore?
- (7) Were dry birds used to ensure against birds sinking beneath the surface of the water?

Answers to these questions have a profound effect upon the nature of the “area of the fall.” It could encompass both land and water. It also might include land, water, and other land. When a bird has been thrown on a sharp angle back into the water and from a boat in open water, the “area of the fall” includes the water on both sides of the boat and behind it.

When marks are close together (tight marks), the “areas of the falls” can overlap. In such tests, Judges will experience difficulty in determining when and if a “switch” has occurred. We recommend against marks that are so close together that the “areas of the falls” are nearly contiguous. Why put the dogs into jeopardy when it is not necessary and only elevates issues the Judges and dogs must face?

On a relatively flat field with a round hay bale at 250 yards from the line, there is a wide and deep ravine or gulch behind the bale. The ravine about thirty yards wide and deep enough that a dog will disappear in it. It crosses the entire field. A mark is thrown so that it falls on the level ground on the far side of the ravine some 280 yards away and near to a line to the hay bale, which is on the front side of the ravine. This kind of mark creates an illusion concerning where the bird fell because the ravine is not visible from the line. The bird appears to have fallen near the hay bale. When dogs are sent to retrieve this mark, many will hunt near the bale some thirty yards short of the spot where the bird actually fell beyond the ravine. Marks with optical illusions of this kind create special demands upon Judges. Should dogs that hunt short by thirty yards and near to the hay bale be penalized? We think not. The “area of the fall” must take into account the illusion created by the natural landscape. Watch to see how quickly the dog recovers to find the bird.

Here is another anomaly concerning a shot live flier that can create a

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unique “area of the fall” for the Judges. The crates of live birds, the gun team and bird thrower are located up on the side of a hill. The incline is steep enough behind the gun team that a bird shot directly behind them and up the hill is clearly visible as it falls to the ground. This is the intended “area of the fall.”⁴ Does the “area of the fall” extend to the front or down hillside of the gun team? It might if the shot flier falls rather short. If it flies and falls normally or long, then all of the “area of the fall” will be behind the live gun team. A dog can pass the shooters on either side of them and arrive in the “area of the fall.”

Ending Remarks

The essential nature and features of the area of the fall were reviewed with references to the pertinent Rules. Some examples were drawn to assist in understanding this difficult concept. We will be happy if one Judge, trainer, owner or handler learns something from the discussion.

Writing about the area of the fall has been a challenge. Incredible as it seems, the drafters of the Rules who wrote about the area of the fall, found the concept indescribable. They said: we find the area of the fall to be “arbitrary, “hypothetical,” and that it “defies description.” We have attempted to define it while also thinking it arbitrary and hypothetical; and unnecessary. It should not take nearly 5,000 words to explain a field trial Rules concept.

Postscript

The principle that retrievers are primarily **hunting dogs** is well understood; also known is that field trial competitions are contrived events. When the Rules were written for retriever field trials, homage was paid to the principle that retrievers are, first of all, **hunters**. There is little doubt that this principle led to the development and inclusion in the Rules of the ideas of an *area of the fall* and an *ordinary day's shoot*. Real hunting dogs are not expected to pinpoint their marks even though they often do. They hunt and retrieve. They are fun to watch when hunting with them; they become life long friends. The field trial requirements of marking, handling, obedience, and delivery to hand are also a tribute to the nature of a good hunting dog. It is a fact, however, that any retriever which cannot mark fairly closely when attempting to retrieve falls, will not be effective in field trials. They will be “washed out” rather quickly.

The development of effective training techniques, scientific breeding, genetic engineering, and field trial testing procedures has substantially improved retriever breeds. A result is that requirements for them in field trials now go far beyond what was required of a field trial dog when the Rules were first formulated. Current field trial practices supersede what was done for and expected of them even just a decade ago. Discussions today about concepts like the *area of the fall* and an

ordinary day's shoot settle into the minds of Judges as rather obscure, archaic and useless.

Field trial enthusiasts, many of whom are also hunters, laugh at the idea of a field trial as an *ordinary day's shoot*. Just the opposite is true. Field trials are extremely controlled affairs. Real hunting experiences are never ‘ordinary;’ they are usually **extraordinary**. Pheasants are known to flush behind the gunners; land in trees; dive into snow banks and run like sprinters. Any of these tactics in a field trial would lead to a re-run. Take, for example, a shot cock bird that landed and crawled inside a waterway culvert: the hunter's dog retrieves the bird. An incoming drake Mallard was shot and landed in the rushes behind the duck blind. Old “Blue” went and retrieved the bird. None of this is the “stuff” of field trials. These common experiences from real “ordinary day's shoots” would all be categorized as “no-birds” at a field trial. The phrase ... “an *ordinary day's shoot*,” when applied to today's field trial practices, is nonsense. Aside from the fortuitous claim that long flying crippled birds that fall far from the line justify long marks, there is little else if anything about today's field trials that pertains to an *ordinary day's shoot*.

All the rigmarole about an *area of the fall* and an *ordinary day's shoot* is not necessary. Judges are astute enough to observe, record and score what they see without any reference to an *area of the fall*. Did the dog go to the bird or near to it on its first cast? Where else did it go? Was the hunt for the bird stylish? Their diagrams and notes will answer these and other questions and reflect the effort made by a dog to find, retrieve, and deliver the bird; and, scoring will not materially change.

Happy hunting and trialing! ■

¹*Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers: Including Standing Recommendations of the Retriever Advisory Committee and the Supplement to the Standard Procedure*. Amended to October, 2015, Published by The American Kennel Club.

²Judges will decide what “appreciably outscored” means. It is NOT a score of 10 vs a score of 7-8. It should be more on a scale of 10 vs a score of 8-9, for example. Or, a score of A vs A- or B+ Or, a score of *Excellent* vs a score of *Very Good*.

³For an excellent discussion of pheasant fliers and marks, see: “The Art of Bird Placement.” Part III, *Retriever News*, August, 2013, p. 46.

⁴If the area behind the gun team and up the incline was not the intended “area of the fall,” even though the fall is clearly visible, then a no-bird should be called and the dog given a re-run. The dog's number should NOT be called for it is very likely to cause a hunt since all the scent from previous falls is in another area than the one where the bird fell. If, however, the dog's number is called, and it goes directly to the area of that bird (out of the “area of the fall”) it should receive a top score. This directive should also apply to any other flier fall that clearly fell well out of the normal “area of the fall” and the dog was sent. Let us, as Judges, be fair to these wonderful animals.

