



Susan Exo and Test Dog  
FC Maple Creek's  
Spirit Warrior, "Levi" at the  
2013 National Amateur  
in Mondovi, Wisconsin.  
Photo by Molly Schlachter.

# Blowing It!

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

## Introduction

Judges and handlers need to give some thought to behaviors observed during blind retrieve tests. Whistling, arm signals, voice commands and casting methods will be addressed. This report is not a criticism of any training methods. It is a reflection upon common actions observed at field trials some of which are questionable and/or against the rules and others which have been judged incorrectly.

## The Routine

A dog is sent to retrieve a blind. The handler blows a stop whistle command and the dog stops, turns and sits facing the handler. Sitting on a stop whistle is not a requirement. The dog should come to a complete stop. Failure to come to a complete stop is a serious fault. An arm cast signal and perhaps some body movement is then given to the dog commanding it to change direction toward the blind plant. There may or may not be a simultaneous voice command. An arm cast followed quickly (in a few seconds) by a loud voice command is also routine and not a violation of the rules. When the dog is some distance from the handler or wind conditions are severe, the voice command may be given prior to the arm cast to account for the sound taking longer to reach the dog than a visual arm cast. The intent is to coordinate the arrival of the visual and vocal commands so that each will reach the dog nearly simultaneously. This description is the conventional norm expected for stopping and casting a dog during a blind retrieve.

## Observations

A dog was whistle stopped and sat facing the handler. When a right side angle back arm cast was given, the dog turned to the left then ran on a line to the right. It turned away from the cast but continued on the line indicated by the arm cast. This is not a fault. Which way a dog turns on a cast is not the point. Observe where the dog went. The dog took the cast and improved its position toward the blind. Its behavior was not faulty.

On a water blind, a dog swims by a land point that the judges have instructed should be crossed. The handler blows a stop whistle, calls the dog toward him, stops the dog again and casts it onto the point. This is a failure. Judges do not want to see a dog coming toward them without a bird in its jaws. There are a few exceptional circumstances which will be addressed. Only one opportunity is afforded to cross the point correctly. An attempt to cross the point should be made without allowing the dog to swim by it. A second chance at it creates unfairness and a lack of equity toward all the dogs.

It is a general principle that a dog on a blind retrieve should make progress toward the blind plant when stopped for a cast and given a new direction. The rule is:

*... a dog should take the original line given to him by his handler and continue on it until he either makes the "find," or until stopped by the handler and given a new line. [Rules, p. 55.]*

The words ... "continue on it until he either makes a 'find' " ... in the quotation above, implies that casts should assist the dog in making progress toward the blind plant. A dog cannot make the find when intentionally moved on a line away from it by the handler. Any penalties are a matter for the judges to decide.

One exception is when a dog is behind the blind plant a few feet and is called toward it for the retrieve. In this instance, although the dog is moving toward the line, it is also making progress to the blind plant. This is called "boxing the bird" at the end. Judges sometimes place the planted bird in a difficult position causing hunts at the end when the dog is close to the bird.

Another exception occurs when a fast dog is whistle stopped and its quick turn puts it behind a tree or bush or some object and the handler cannot see the dog. It is not far off a direct line to the blind. Some handlers will give a vocal "back" to get the dog in sight so that they can whistle stop and cast it. Others will "tweet" the dog in a bit so that they can do the same. Which method should be used is debatable. This exception has some excellent judges split about evenly as to which method is best. Judges should exercise common sense in these situations and also give the dog the benefit of any doubt about the rules while taking into consideration the complete blind from beginning to end.

After a dog is underway on a blind retrieve, a "BACK" command ushers from the handler without a whistle stop. This is a fault. A stop whistle should precede a vocal command when a dog is underway. Many judges treat this kind of handle as a serious fault. The handler may have intended to force the dog to continue when fearing a "pop" was about to occur. Or, the command may have intended to speed up a slow moving dog. Whatever the reason, there should be a penalty since the dog was not stopped prior to the vocal command. The seriousness of the penalty is a matter for judges to decide.

The key phrase in the rule, cited above, is ... "until stopped." Stopping is a requirement prior to casting a dog in a new direction. A vocal command to a moving dog that has not been stopped is an unattractive method of casting and is more like a training routine. It is not the customary, conventional, or routine method of casting and as such can lead to the perception that the handler is simply yelling at the dog rather than controlling it. Remember, blind retrieves are principally a matter of control.

While on this topic of yelling at a dog, when a handler picks up a dog which has failed a blind uses loud language and displays anger toward it, the behavior is ugly, unsportsmanlike, and an embarrassment to the field trial community, to any family with children and others who may be in the gallery. The handler should be issued a warning by the judges.

*Sportsmen refuse to embarrass the sport, the American Kennel Club, or themselves while taking part in the sport. [Rules, inside back cover.]*

It sometimes happens that when a dog is going for a short retired mark and is about to miss it and go deep, the handler will blow "tweet tweet tweet" to get the dog to slow and hunt for the retired bird. This is a handle. Handling on a mark is a failure to mark and the judges decide how much weight to give to any penalty. A distinct single whistle blast is the norm for stopping a dog prior to casting it in a new direction.

A handler sends a dog from the line with a "back" command so loud that it rocks the judges back in their chairs. There is no penalty if the dog leaves the line. Some handlers are partially deaf and their volume is not noticeable to them. When a blind is lengthy, many handlers use strong vocal tones on the send to drive the dog out there. There is no penalty for this method of release.

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A handler stops the dog and then steps laterally either to the left or right. There is no arm cast or vocal command. This is a body movement command which generally is intended to turn the dog in the direction of the handler's step and send it almost straight back. There is nothing wrong with this type of handling and it is completely acceptable.

A dog is on a point of land during a water blind test. The handler issues stop whistles which the dog ignores. There is nothing warranting a penalty yet as the point may have been scented. Any number of dogs may have returned over the point with a dripping duck causing scent to be located there. The dog may just be honoring its nose. After several whistle stop commands with no proper response, the dog may be out of control. In reaching a decision, judges should consider the response of other dogs at the same location as these observations are indicative of the nature of the test and will assist them in drawing conclusions about dogs with slow responses to the whistles on that point. The seriousness of penalties, if any, is a matter for the judges to decide. If they confirm that the dog was out of control, it will be eliminated.

A handler blows a stop whistle just as the dog slips over and behind a point in the water. The dog raises its head from behind the point to see the handler who then casts the dog. Smart dog. We judge intelligence too. There is nothing wrong with this action. Another handler lets the dog disappear over a point; then, after several seconds, the handler "tweet tweets" the dog which swims back onto the point. It is whistle stopped and the handler then casts it. This is not good handling. Handlers should watch the test dog and other dogs run the blind in order to establish in their minds where the most difficult parts of the blind are located. Then, they must anticipate and be ready to quickly blow their stop whistles as needed in order to avoid handler error. Some handlers are slow to respond and let the dog get into trouble before they blow a stop whistle. This can lead, for example, to the dog getting out of sight too long when it should not have been. This second dog failed the test due primarily to handler error.

A dog does not stop when a handler blows a stop whistle command. This is a minor fault on the first occurrence. The judges must discern whether the dog heard the whistle. Was the dog running into a strong wind? Was it running in shallow water causing a disturbance which drowned the sound of the whistle? Not stopping on a first whistle command the dog should have heard is a minor fault.

A handler blows a stop whistle and the dog slowly makes a wide arcing turn and finally stops. (Older dogs which are arthritic do this and should receive no penalty.) This dog did not stop quickly or display the kind of style which judges seek. Style is a behavior often referred to in the rules and only second in that respect to marking ability. Strong marking dogs exhibiting great style are the zenith in field trial retrievers. Fast and stylish dogs learn to turn and stop quickly on command. This is a training factor. Dogs which turn slowly in a wide arc should receive a notation for future reference in the judges' notebooks as this behavior is a deficiency in style.

A handler sees a dog slow its gait when further progress toward the blind plant is necessary. The handler may think the dog is about to "pop." A stop whistle is blown followed by a loud "BACK" command. Judges are not mind readers or critics of training methods. They observe behavior. So far, no fault has occurred except perhaps a slow gait. **When a "pop" does occur, the first instance of it is a minor fault. A single "pop" on a blind retrieve is NOT by itself a reason to eliminate a dog.** This is because judges do not know whether the dog heard a whistle from a nearby stake. Or, sometimes a song bird tweet in the vicinity sounds like a handler's whistle. There are other possibilities, too. The dog initially receives the benefit of doubt respecting the reason for a "pop." Further pops become moderate or even severe faults and may cause elimination.

During a blind retrieve, a dog sits on command facing the handler. When a cast is given, the dog does not respond. After several tries and no response, the judges should consider whether the handler is sky lighted which means the dog is looking into the sky behind the handler who is usually upon a ridge or hill with the dog below. Dogs do not have visual acuity in bright light. Was the sun directly behind the handler? Was darkness and the close of day causing a visual problem? Was someone or some thing in white near the handler causing the dog to look in the wrong place for the handler? Judges, in the interest of equity, should be generous in their evaluations of these situations.

A handler sends a dog on a land blind. The dog leaves the line off to either the left or right of the direct line and continues in a rainbow like fashion to the blind plant. No whistle stops occur. The handler thinks the dog has lined the blind. This dog was dropped from the callback list. When an inquiry through the marshal reached the judges, they informed the marshal that the dog was never on a direct line to the blind except when sitting aside the handler and when picking up the bird. The handler made no attempt to put the dog onto the direct line to the blind plant during the run and, as a result, it failed the test.

The initial line given by the handler is important. When the dog is next to its handler and can receive considerable direction and guidance prior to release, it should launch on a line to the blind which is the shortest and most direct route. This is why initial lines are so important. Long and direct initial lines run before a first whistle stop grab the attention of the judges as exceptional efforts.

A handler ordered the dog to leave the line on a blind retrieve and the dog did not move. The send command was distinctly loud enough for the dog to hear it. Another send command was given and the dog left the handler's side. The dog was eliminated. Sometimes handlers release in a soft tone which the dog may not recognize as a send. This can confuse the dog. When there is no form of interference or confusion, a dog should be eliminated for not going when sent. Each situation of this genre is different and requires the judges to review the facts.

*A dog sent on a blind retrieve shall at once proceed in the general direction of the line given by the handler. A dog that fails to do so shall, in the absence of unusual extenuating circumstances, be eliminated from the stake. [Rules, p. 36.]*

Judges have eliminated dogs with **no other faults** except for a single cast refusal on a blind retrieve. This is not good judging. It is extraordinary since a single cast refusal is mentioned in the rules as a minor fault. ... "failure to hold the line or take the handler's directions ..." [Rules, p. 58.]

## Conclusion

Actual situations such as those presented are useful learning tools for beginning and less experienced judges. They serve as memory refreshment for experienced judges. Handlers also may learn from the commentary concerning these often observed happenings at retriever field trials. There was no attempt herein to catalog every kind of test or situational event which might happen during a blind retrieve. If sufficient interest is forthcoming, we will return to blind retrieve testing and other kinds of issues with respect thereto.

As in all of our essays, we reiterate that it has been our intention to assist in improving the quality of judging. ■

## Note:

The rules cited were taken from: *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 November 2017, Published by the American Kennel Club.