

Bringing HOME

Here comes the meat in the mouth of a retriever. How do you wish the game bird to be prepared? There are plenty of retrievers that will tenderize (stickiness), flatten (hard-mouth), turn it (rolling the bird), or drop it for seasoning (dropping the bird). Some decide to keep it for themselves (freezing). Other dogs leave it (“blink: failure to deliver”) thinking the meat unfit to retrieve. A few decide to eat the bird (hard-mouth). The best dogs bring home the meat without any mouthy preparations.

Judges should esteem dogs trained to *deliver* birds to handlers correctly. Far too many dogs cannot do it. The faults most often seen are: stickiness, rolling a bird, and dropping a bird. Less often seen are: freezing, failure to deliver, and hard-mouth. The degree of *delivery* faults run the gamut from minor to serious depending upon their repetitiveness and the severity of the occurrence(s). The penalties for these faults range from minor deductions in scores to elimination. We will address these faults mentioning the *Rules* which apply to them. We will also provide insights and suggestions concerning *delivery to hand* learned from Judging, training, and handling retrievers over the past fifty years. Instructive advice from the *Rules*¹ is a stellar way to begin.

“At the risk of over-simplification, it might be stated that the primary purpose of a retriever is to get the birds to hand as quickly as possible in a pleasing, obedient manner and all faults stem from a deviation from this.” (Rules, p. 48.)

“Quickly” is a style trait much emphasized in the Rules; both “pleasing” and “obedient” infer that the dog has not chomped the bird and will ‘drop’ it into the handler’s hand without delay when commanded. Style is an important natural attribute and is mentioned in the Rules as often as marking and is a highly desirable trait in retrievers. Also:

“When ordered, a dog should retrieve quickly and briskly ... and should deliver tenderly to hand.” (Rules, p. 32.) And,

“Upon returning, he should deliver the bird promptly and tenderly to his handler.” (Rules, p. 35.)

These four references to delivery ... **quickly, briskly, promptly and tenderly**, clearly emphasize its importance. *Delivery* of the bird should not be taken lightly by the Judges. Watch carefully when a handler takes the bird from the dog. Does the dog swing its head away from the handler trying thereby to hold the bird longer? Does the dog drop the bird on the ground requiring a “fetch” command? Was there a wing over the dog’s eyes? Did the “wing over” cause the dog to place the bird on the ground then grasp it again?

Did the handler experience some difficulty in getting the bird? Or, did the dog give the bird to the handler obediently? Judges, make a note that *delivery* was either good or faulty.

Notice whether handlers try tricks to get a bird. Did the handler pinch the dog’s lip against its teeth to pressure the dog to deliver? Did the handler step on the dog’s paw. Another trick used by handlers to force a difficult *delivery* is to hold one hand above the dog’s head while putting the other

hand onto the bird. The hand above the head is to remind the dog of the times it has been “bonked” for not delivering quickly. The old ‘one-hand in a pocket’ method suggests a mechanical or noise making device therein used to condition a dog’s release of the bird. These faults and handler issues do not represent a “prompt” *delivery*. When repeated, they become more serious and can lead to elimination in the worst cases.

The *Rules* further emphasize the importance of *delivery to hand*. For example:

“Delivery of the bird should be made to the handler directly upon return from the retrieve; it should be given up willingly. A dog should not drop the bird before delivering it; and he should not “freeze,” or be unwilling to give it up. He should not jump after the bird once the handler has taken it from him.” (Rules, p. 55.)

Some dogs snap after the bird when the handler is attempting to pass it to a Judge. This usually occurs when the last bird is being passed. Handlers may use their bodies to block the “snappy” dog while passing the bird. This is not a clean *delivery* and should be noted by the Judges as a fault. A Judge’s hand is not part of this transaction; Judges have been injured by such antics. Also, Judges should not assist the handler in these circumstances by turning and sneaking the bird from behind the handler. Wait until the handler passes it. Judges have no obligation to assist in a safe *delivery*. Judges should pay close attention to this kind of dog. This problem has become increasingly apparent at field trials. “Snappy” dogs should be penalized and, in serious cases, eliminated. A serious breach of this Rule about delivery should render the dog that must be blocked as unable to win the stake and it should not receive five championship points. This kind of dog is also liable to attempt to take a bird from those stored behind the line. When a dog takes a bird from those all ready delivered, that dog has committed a serious fault, is out of control and should be dropped from further consideration. Dogs are under judgment until behind the Judges and on lead. A caveat here is that the Judges are responsible to insure that delivered birds have not been thrown pell mell behind the line for they become inducements for a field trial retriever. Delivered birds must be stored effectively and efficiently.

A handler who allows a dog to keep a bird in its mouth while the handler prepares it for the next retrieve by adjusting the dog’s position and sometimes places a hand above the dog’s head to give direction prior to asking for the bird should not be penalized. This procedure is acceptable under the *Rules* when it is accomplished promptly and efficiently. Promptly, as in the *Rules*, means quickly and without delay. However, a handler and dog should be penalized if the dog does not promptly deliver the bird when commanded to do so. Also, if a handler permits the dog to keep the bird in its mouth while excessively lining or uses the technique as a training procedure taking more time than is necessary and proper as part of common practice, or for whatever reason, the Judges should penalize them severely. A field trial is not the place for training. When confronted with a sticky or freezing dog in this or any such faulty circumstance, the Judge accepting

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Photo by Molly Schlachter

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the birds should simply say to the handler ... “deliver the bird now please.” If challenged by the handler, the Judge can reply that the *Rules* require delivery of the bird directly upon return from the retrieve and the word, **directly**, means immediately and without delay or intervention. Should a handler not comply with the request, the dog and handler should be dismissed. Reluctance to deliver is a fault and just how long a Judge should wait is a matter of common sense and normal accepted practice. When a point has been reached to move on with the stake, it's not unreasonable for a Judge to request delivery. When a dog returns with a bird, sits at heel and looks out and the handler has efficiently prepared it for the next send, it is time for the handler to take delivery of the bird. Most handlers do this as a normal procedure. However, handlers who know that a dog has a delivery problem or who have a habit of excessive lining with the dog holding the bird, are the ones for whom the Judges must watch. Additionally, a handler must not be permitted to stand over the dog and stare it down in an attempt to get the bird despite allowing the dog to hold the bird briefly during alignment. Finally, on this point of prompt and direct delivery of the bird, Judges are not required to “manage” the situation to the handler's satisfaction. Handlers know what is required concerning a prompt delivery and if they seem not to know, they should be properly instructed by the Judge taking delivery of the bird.

Should a handler not comply with the request, the dog and handler should be dismissed. Reluctance to deliver is a fault and just how long a Judge should wait is a matter of common sense. When a dog returns with a bird, sits at heel and looks out, it is time for the handler to take delivery. A handler must not be permitted to stand over the dog and stare it down in an attempt to get the bird. Delivery should take but a few seconds and never longer than a 30-40 seconds after the return with the bird and the “sit” command, if necessary, has been given. That amount of time is like an eternity to any handler who expects difficulty with the delivery but is sufficient time for any well-trained dog to deliver the bird. And, there is this:

“Judges shall have the power to turn out of the stake any dog which does not obey its handler ...” (Rules, p. 36.)

The commands, “drop” or “give” require a dog's obedient response. Exercise caution prior to dismissing a dog for any disobedience. The evidence must be clear and overwhelming that *delivery* was excessively difficult on repeated occasions before Judges even consider dismissal for disobedience during *delivery*.

When a handler issues several commands for the dog to release the bird and has difficulty, there is the possibility of a “freeze” occurring. A “freeze” is a failure by a dog to release the bird. Some dogs have difficulty expelling a bird held deeply in the mouth; that is not a “freeze.” A slight “freeze” occurs when a dog is reluctant to give up the bird but does so after a short time and several commands from the handler. An extreme “freeze” happens when, after many unsuccessful attempts and repeated efforts, the handler cannot get the bird from the dog. Its jaws are locked onto the bird. The Judge taking birds will eventually release the handler whose dog is then dismissed from the stake for failure to *deliver to hand*. We recommend that Judges provide the handler of a dog in an extreme “freeze,” an extended period of time beyond the norm to try for *delivery*. (See the Unscientific Postscript in the End Notes.)

Dogs that “freeze” on a bird will do it on the last bird retrieved during the series. Professional trainers and experienced amateur trainers have various methods for dealing with the problem of “freezing.” Any method may only last a short time and the dog lapses into “freezing” again. It becomes habitual. This is why trainers need more than one method for dealing with the issue of “freezing.” It is not easily resolved. The causes of “freezing” are debatable. Some causes are known. They are related to handlers who re-

peatedly rip birds from dogs' mouths. A heavy finger on the hot buttons of a transmitter too many times during training and when a dog has a bird in its mouth is known to be a cause of “freezing.” Handlers who rush the process of *delivery* are the ones who pull the bird away from the dog, usually with feathers flying, thereby increasing the future likelihood of a “freeze.” Dogs that “freeze” learn to count and know when they have the last bird and, for their reasons, desire to keep it. Notice that the causes cited for extreme “freezing” are all handler induced. *Delivery* is not a ‘tug of war’ game.

There is more in the *Rules* about *delivery*. “A dog that is unwilling to release a bird on delivery should be penalized, and if compelled to do so by severe methods, shall, unless in the opinion of the Judges there exist valid mitigating circumstances, be eliminated.” (Rules, p. 35.) Mitigating circumstances may include: a live bird held by a retriever; a badly shot bird; a bird torn apart by heavy gun loads; a rotten bird; a bird with entrails exposed; a water soaked bird; and, an open wound or a bloody bird. These circumstances occur frequently and Judges must be alert and watch for them. Severe methods are the ripping of a bird from the dog's mouth; also, the forcible twisting and turning of a bird by the handler to extract it. These severe handler tactics should be noted by the Judges as they represent moderate to serious faults.

Any handler who physically abuses a dog to affect delivery, such as for example, punches a dog while under judgment, must be reported to the Field Trial Committee. Other physical abuses which must be reported might include pinching a lip or ear, intentionally stepping upon a paw, or grabbing a dog by the scruff of the neck or the hair on its back and raising it off the ground. These tactics also must be reported and are not to be tolerated under any circumstances.

When basic training is done effectively with young dogs, especially “force fetch” training, “freezing” is less likely to become a problem. During “force fetch” training, a dog learns to grasp, hold, and release a bird on command every time. Handlers must learn how to receive a bird from a dog in a manner that does not lead to a *delivery* problem like “freezing.” Remember, a proper *delivery* occurs when the dog releases the bird into the hand of its handler. The handler **does not** take the bird from the dog. The “give” or “drop” command, when perfectly executed, accurately reflects a good delivery of a bird.

After receiving the bird, the handler passes it to one of the Judges.² Handlers who shake the bird while holding it by the neck, releasing its folded or twisted wings and causing it to hang with the legs down, and then pass it to the Judge, assist in the transfer and reduce the possibility of a dropped bird during the process as it will more easily be taken by the Judge. Judges should never lift a dropped bird from the ground. This responsibility falls upon the handler.

Judges should **not** attempt to take a bird from the handler until it is offered. It can be disconcerting to a handler to have a bird snatched away when the handler is preparing the dog for the next retrieve. Some handlers voluntarily offer the bird to a Judge prior to the next send. There are exceptions and times when a Judge will take the bird. A flier can arrive alive and be flopping its wings and spewing blood. The Judge receiving the birds should then offer to take the live bird as its actions can be distracting to both the dog and the handler.³

Sometimes, a handler holding a bird after sending the dog for a blind retrieve, may suddenly drop the bird on the ground because directions must be quickly given to the dog. Handlers who do this, will normally pick up the bird and pass it to the Judge after they have dealt with the dog. This kind of issue is uncommon and is not a fault as long as the bird is picked up and delivered by the handler to a Judge.

“Rolling” a bird occurs when during *delivery* a dog turns the bird over in its mouth, perhaps several times, and may include jaw pressure with teeth penetrating the bird. “Rolling” is a minor fault which, when repeated, can become a moderate fault. It is commonly seen and Judges pay little atten-

tion to this fault. It is, nevertheless, a fault and should be noted in Judges' books.

That brings us to "stickiness" which is an unwillingness to deliver a bird promptly while giving it up reluctantly and usually with some chomping on the bird. The handler may need several commands to get the dog to release the bird. "Stickiness" is a common minor fault among retrievers. It can become a moderate fault when repeated. The degree of penalty, if any, is a matter to be determined by the Judges. **No set scale of penalties is possible for delivery faults because of the array of intervening factors in any given instance.** Both "rolling" and "stickiness" are faults because the dog did not **deliver promptly and tenderly** as required by the Rules and should be noted in Judges' books. **The severity of any penalties for faulty delivery is completely dependent upon the views taken by the Judges both independently and in their discussions of these matters during callback rituals and when summing. Their decisions must conform to the Rules.**

"Hard-mouth," or badly damaging a bird, which, in the opinion of the Judges, was caused solely by the dog without justification – mandatory elimination under the STANDARD. (Rules, Serious Faults, No. 10, p. 57.) And, "... Judges should inspect the bird and be satisfied that the dog alone was responsible for the damage." (Rules, p. 35.)

The issue of "hard-mouth," a serious fault which requires elimination from the stake, is given lengthy discussion in the *Rules* due to the extreme nature of the offense and the difficulty of validating it. The *Rules* provide guidance for Judges with respect to this fault. Judges need to be familiar with those directives. Once a dog has been eliminated for "hard-mouth," a stigma is attached to the dog. Therefore, the Judges must exercise caution when "hard-mouth" is suspected; they should carefully review and examine all of the circumstances and evidence. What exactly is "hard-mouth?"

"Hard-mouth" is extremely rough and damaging treatment of a bird by a dog. 'When bones have been crushed throughout the bird, the flesh torn open, the skin badly ripped apart, or the bird is partially divided or eaten, the Judges have trustworthy evidence to be suspicious of "hard-mouth." Damage to the bird, however, and alone, is not satisfactory evidence of "hard-mouth." It can be caused by the dog having passed through heavy cover, sharp sticks and pointed stones, and heavy loads used by gunners. Also, a stylish dog with a fast pickup can cause damage incidentally and unintentionally as it grabs the bird from the ground when passing it. Pheasants have especially vulnerable flesh and skin which is easily damaged by a dog without intent.' (Rules, p. 53.)

If there is some suspicion that a dog may be damaging birds, the Judges should carefully inspect successive birds delivered by it. Judges are wise, when not having witnessed the dog inflict damage to the bird, to communicate directly with bird throwers and members of the gun team who may have seen or heard the dog's destructive behavior. Dogs sometimes lay down in cover where they are not visible while crunching a bird. The sounds of the destruction are empirical evidence of "hard-mouth." *'While it is not a requirement, Judges should set aside a damaged bird and show it to the handler in an inconspicuous manner at a later time.'* (Rules, p. 54.)

Dead birds have had some physical damage inflicted when they were shot. It is not uncommon for a dead bird thrower to possess birds with broken wings and legs and other damage. Sometimes, in the act of throwing these birds, further damage occurs as, for example, when a head comes off during the act of throwing a bird, or a wing or leg is broken. Judges need to know about these possibilities, too. The stake Marshal, when sending birds to throwers, or when preparing for a "re-bird," should inspect all birds and withdraw any that are not suitable for use. We strongly suggest that only dry birds and freshly shot fliers that have not been in water be used in the water series for All-Age stakes.

Much can be done to alleviate the temptations to dogs which damaged birds pose. *"Every bird retrieved, and delivered to the handler, should be in-*

spected by one of the Judges, preferably not the one who is calling numbers. Failure to inspect retrieved birds must be cataloged as carelessness, and is an undesirable practice. It is unfair to all dogs that are being tested – not alone in respect to the question of "hard-mouth," but, more particularly, since it may furnish the explanation for a slow pickup or some other oddity in a dog's performance." (Rules, p. 45.)

The Field Trial Chair and Gun Team Captain should insure that shotgun shells used by the live gunners are lighter loads provided by the host club. Gunners should not use heavy loads, which are responsible for more damage to birds than any other cause. Successive hits on a flier inflict greater damage. Instructions to gunners to shoot away from the bird, after it has clearly been killed by the first shot, will go far in reducing damage to fliers. Gunners should use open chokes, as barrel chokes with tight patterns are known to increase the damage to fliers. These gun team practices assist in lessening open wounds on the birds and thereby decrease the temptations to dogs.

Delivery to hand is an important acquired ability to be Judged in all stakes. We are not suggesting that it is somehow more or less important than natural abilities. Both natural and acquired abilities are important, especially in an all-age dog. We also are not suggesting that Judges begin applying lower scores for minor "delivery" problems. Just be alert, watch for them, and note them. They can accelerate into moderate or serious faults requiring penalties or elimination.

The Judges should seek as their winner in an All-Age stake, a dog which manifests both natural and acquired abilities in an excellent manner and better than other finalists. Marking is of primary importance and "primary" means, number one as a natural attribute. A good retriever must be able to find the birds quickly and to do so, must mark them. Dogs can be dismissed from further testing for failure to mark as well as for serious faults related to acquired abilities like *delivery of the bird to hand*, **even if they are excellent marking dogs.** Numerous minor or additional moderate faults committed during *delivery* should be considered when Judges are summing the results to reach a winner, placements, and Judges' Awards for Merit.

We have reviewed the proper *delivery* of a bird by a dog to its handler and from a handler to a Judge. We mentioned the *Rules* pertaining to *delivery* and the faults which detract from it. We urge Judges to note all faults, including those pertaining to *delivery*. Summing should involve a review of ALL excellent traits as well as ALL faults. It simply is too easy for Judges to fall into a habit of reviewing only marks and blinds neglecting the acquired abilities which make a finished all-age retriever. Perhaps we have contributed to the fair treatment by Judges of dogs that perform *delivery to hand* correctly. ■

¹ Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers. Amended to October 2015. Published by The American Kennel Club.

² In some instances, handlers have thrown or dropped a delivered bird onto the ground rather than giving it to a Judge. If the bird is not lifted by the handler and delivered to a Judge, the handler is eliminated for failure to deliver. Throwing a bird to the ground when a dog has failed a test is poor sportsmanship. In rare situations, handlers have thrown a bird striking a Judge. Hitting a Judge with a bird must be reported to the Field Trial Committee.

Unscientific Postscript: One reason that Judges should permit extra time for a handler with a dog in a *serious freeze* condition is that the *freeze* has been, over time, handler induced. The handler stands before the gallery trying and failing to get delivery. This is a lesson for the gallery about forcibly taking birds from the mouths of retrievers.

³ When a Judge attempted to take a flier from a handler, he grasped it more tightly. Later, he said to the Judges, 'I wanted to hold it as long as possible because it may be the only bird I get!'