

# Can Hardly Wait:

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

ANXIOUS, EXCITABLE, and sometimes not fully trained, retrievers will creep forward of the line while the birds are falling. Creeping is a fault. Creeping is a false start. It is also a sign that a dog can hardly wait to go for the bird. It is also annoying to handlers for when a dog is ahead of the line, it cannot be turned and its direction, attention, and vision controlled by the handler. Sometimes a creeping dog is overcome by desire for a bird and will go completely out of control and break. A dog that breaks is eliminated. Short of breaking, how are Judges to react and evaluate various kinds of creeping? What are the *Rules* which apply to creeping? These matters will be discussed and some insights respecting them will be provided.

From the start, here is an important reminder for Judges. It is about how steadiness occurs and creeping is controlled. Young retrievers with desire to spare, which is most field trial dogs, are ready to go after the bird NOW. This instinct must come under control and that happens through training. That desire to GO must be funneled until the retriever gives its will to the handler. It is similar to putting a foot on the brake pedal and teaching when to take it off and when to push on the accelerator. Bringing a high-strung retriever to a state of steadiness requires hours of work and training. Sometimes, steadying a “high” retriever is especially difficult. When Judges see a retriever sit still on the line and not move as the test begins and the birds fall, they are seeing a marvel to behold. The dog has learned to obey its handler and master trainer. This is a serious accomplishment! Steadiness is a virtue in a field trial dog and even more so in a hunting retriever where gun safety in the duck blind or in a field is of paramount importance. Judges, write in the book, obedient and steady on line! This trait is worthy of your attention and notation. The steadiness could become very important when summing at the end of the stake and could mean a difference in placements.

The creeping dog has not learned the lessons of steadiness fully if at all. This is a shortcoming in basic training. Judges should note this weakness and fault in their books and penalize it. There is a difference between what is often referred to as a “power dog” and one that is not fully trained. Both may exhibit degrees of unsteadiness on the line; however, the enthusiasm of the “power dog” is quickly brought under control by the handler. The enthusiasm of the less fully trained dog is not quickly brought under control, if at all. Judges must note the difference and honor the time, effort and work involved in training and the hours that go into bringing a high-strung retriever to a state of steadiness. Not to do so is to demean the work of diligent retriever trainers and their steady dogs; their efforts deserve recognition.

*“When coming to line to be tested, and while on line, the dog and handler should assume such positions as may be directed by the Judges.” (Rules, p. 28.)*

And: *“When ordered to retrieve, the handler shall direct his dog from any position designated by the Judges.” (Rules, p. 31.)*

This *Rule* brings us to a discussion about the line, mats, and instructions placed in holding blinds, all of which are encountered when coming to the line. Instructions are often placed in holding blinds to provide information to handlers. The instructions are deemed important information that the Judges wish to provide to handlers and are intended to benefit the handlers. There is an important caveat with respect to written instructions; they cannot replace, override, alter, or in any way countermand a *Rule*. Here is an example.

The following instruction from the Judges was written and placed in the holding blind for all handlers to read. It said: *“Send the dog from the mat.”* A handler’s dog crept entirely off the mat as birds were falling in the first land series of an All-Age stake. The dog’s number was called after the last bird was down and the dog was off the mat. The handler sent the dog without heeling the dog back onto the mat. Later, the dog was not on the callback list. Since the dog had good work, the handler inquired concerning the callbacks. The Judges informed the handler, through the marshal, that the dog was dropped because the handler had not sent it from the mat for its first retrieve as per the instructions. This was clearly a mistake made by the Judges. Calling a dog’s number constitutes a “release.” The *Rule* which applies is:

**“In all stakes, after the Judges have directed that a dog be ordered to retrieve, that dog is entitled to run in and retrieve ...”**  
*(Rules, p. 34.)*

If the Judges want the dog on the mat for that first retrieve and after it has crept off it, the Judge calling numbers should instruct the handler to heel the dog onto the mat **prior to calling its number**. Once the number has been called, irrespective of the dog’s physical position, the dog is released to retrieve and instructions in the holding blind cannot change this Rule. Subsequent sends during the test are the responsibility of the handler who must get the dog onto the mat prior to sending in order to comply with the posted instruction.

How is it that instructions about a “mat” came to be? It has become a convention that when any part of a dog is touching a mat, the dog is considered to be on the mat and on line. Previously, Judges used paint, sticks, logs, chains, and ribbons to designate the “line.”

# Creeping



Photo by Tina Styran

## Can Hardly Wait – Creeping

When the test was not a blind retrieve, some Judges would simply say 'take a position directly in front of us where you are comfortable.' The National stakes found that hay was not suitable to keep the line dry. The need to keep the line dry is important as dogs are not excited about planting their rear quarter in a pool of mud and cold water when ordered to sit. The carpet came to the Nationals, a large one. It could be easily reversed, swept, or replaced; soon to follow was the mat. And then following the precedent set by National stakes to keep the line dry, the mat became the "line" in Club field trials. There is nothing in the *Rules* about mats. Perhaps there should be.

*"Unless otherwise instructed by the Judges, no dog should be sent to retrieve until his number has been called by one of the Judges. Judges should call the number of the dog ordered to retrieve rather than the name of the handler or dog. 13. If, when a dog is ordered by the Judge to retrieve a fall, another dog breaks for the same fall and interferes with the working dog to the extent of causing him in any way to make a faulty performance, the dog interfered with should be considered as not having been tried and given a chance for another performance." (Rules, p. 30.)*

*"Calling the dog's number as a signal for the handlers to send his dog is proper, but it is not proper to call the dog's name or the handler's name for this purpose. It makes for greater uniformity, as a rule, if one Judge is responsible for all three of the foregoing duties in each series, with the Judges rotating or taking turns at this duty in different series." (Rules, p. 45.)*

Calling the dog's number is mentioned twice in the *Rules*. Don't be a lazy Judge and release by using the term ... "dog." Cannot remember numbers? Learn to stick a finger in the book on the dog's page for quick and easy reference. Also, there have been retrievers named "Dawg." Calling 'dog' as a release could cause one named "Dawg" to leave the line before the handler desires. (Note: The AKC does not permit 'Dog' as a registered name. However, 'Dawg' can be part of a registered name.)

*"The Judges should agree in advance as to the extent of movement which shall be considered "creeping," short of breaking, and whether working dogs so offending shall be ordered brought to heel before being sent to retrieve. Also, in the minor stakes, where "controlled" breaks are permissible, the Judges should reach an agreement about the degree they will consider a "controlled" break in contrast to one which will eliminate the dog from further competition; also, they should be in agreement about the severity of the penalties to assess for various degrees of "controlled" breaks." (Rules, p. 46.)*

The Judges must be consistent in their calls with respect to creeping and the penalties pertaining thereto, so as not to appear either negligent or partisan.

The agreements concerning creeping should be reached prior to the start of the stake and should be part of Judges' discussions which occur before the stake begins. There are no set policies respecting creeping and the agreements reached by Judges with respect to creeping are conventions. When the last bird is down and a dog has crept forward of the line, some Judges simply call the number. They reason that since the handler cannot go forward to handle the dog, there is a disadvantage and asking the handler to heel the dog assists the handler. Other Judges reach agreement that a dog should be called to heel when: the dog is either (1) off the mat; (2) the dog is 1-2 dog lengths off the mat; (3) the dog is more than two dog lengths off the mat, and so on. The Judges also must reach agreement concerning when the creeping becomes suf-

ficiently faulty to warrant a moderate or serious penalty and/or elimination. There have been instances in the first series of All-Age stakes when a dog that crept off the line by as much as 40 yards has gone on to win the stake. Most Judges would not have carried such a dog past that first series and would have considered such creeping to be a "break" requiring elimination.

Judges are also responsible to reach agreement concerning when an honoring dog has exhibited unsteadiness sufficient for elimination. Questions: (1) Should a dog which creeps while honoring be eliminated? (2) What constitutes a creep when a dog is honoring? (3) Should creeping by the honoring dog be permitted so long as it does not interfere with the working dog?

Some Judges think that when an honoring dog raises from the sit position, it has broken the honor and should be eliminated. We think this approach too severe and should be avoided. For example, the *Rules* state that after delivering, a dog should sit or stand until given further directions by the handler. Standing is permissible. The real question is this: when has the honoring dog interfered with the working dog? The answer to this question will determine when the Judges should eliminate an honoring dog.

*"A "reasonable" degree of steadiness and general obedience are the requirements in Derby stakes. A greater degree of steadiness and some degree of the other qualities are expected in the Qualifying stake. There should be expectation of full refinement in "acquired attributes" in those stakes carrying championship points.*

*(1) Steadiness to the extent of defining what constitutes a "break" is clearly presented in Section 26 of the "STANDARD." However, a degree of amplification might be helpful: Dogs on-line sometimes make various types of movements when game is in the air (and/or when it is shot). Such movements may be interpreted as efforts by the dogs to improve their view of the "fall," and some occur through sheer excitement. Except for an occasional change in position in order to better see a "fall," all such movements should be penalized as unsteadiness – the degree of penalty depending on the extent and the frequency of repetition of the offense or offenses. The requirement of steadiness is a very important factor in judging the work of retrievers." (Rules, p.54.)*

A moderate fault:

*"In any stake other than an All-Age stake, a slight break after which the dog is brought immediately under control." (Rules, p. 58.)*

*"Repetition of a fault, particularly time after time, indicates a "weakness" or a bad habit, and justifies much more penalty than in an isolated occurrence of this fault. The same holds true when there is a combination of different faults." (Rules, p. 56.)*

A minor fault:

*"Unsteadiness on-line, including creeping." (Rules, p. 58.)*

Some Judges have withheld calling the creeping dog's number just to learn whether it might break. The creeping dog is excited and anxious to retrieve. Not calling the number in a timely fashion is an unfair practice and the time interval between when the last bird is down in a marking test and the call of the number should be kept constant. Some of the very best field champions have been creepers. Nevertheless, it is a fault and should be considered by judges in their summing of results. It was mentioned that the Judges may wish to have a creeping dog brought to heel prior to calling its number. Remember, the creeping dog with enormous desire may become one of the dogs to achieve a place at the end of the stake. Or, it may eventually be eliminated. Judges should be aware of the causes of creeping which is a natural trait, the amount of training that goes into creating a steady dog, the severity of penalties if any, and judge accordingly. ■