

I Cannot See

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

IT'S A BLIND RETRIEVE SET-UP, a test of control.

"Nevertheless, the test should be so planned that the dog should be "in-sight continuously." (Rules¹, pp. 43-4.)

Attention: "in-sight continuously" means and is defined as: the ability to see the dog without interruption or cessation; or, an unceasing vision of the dog. This is what the words mean. They do not even suggest that the dog may be out of one's eye sight at any time. However, in the wisdom of forbearance in the retriever field trial community, a **convention** for blind retrieves has become this:

A dog may be out of sight for a few seconds where the words "a few" mean ONLY a small number of seconds and no longer.²

This convention is NOT part of the rules for AKC Retriever field trials. It does not imply, nor do we, that a member of the Field Trial Committee ought time the test dogs running blind retrieves at their field trial with a stop watch. This convention, a few seconds out of sight, came into existence to assist trial giving clubs and Judges where the landscape, terrain, and water available had no place where the dogs would stay in-sight continuously during blind retrieve testing. The convention was a very slight adjustment in the rule. It has been accepted by the field trial community. Of utmost importance is this: the convention (out of sight no longer than a few seconds) should be honored by all Judges and all trial giving clubs. Stretching the time limitation even a little leads to further stretching and, as has now become apparent, dogs are all too often out of sight on blind retrieves for longer than the **Rule** and convention allow. This is truly an unfair situation. It does not permit handling the dog which is out of sight before it is too far off an imaginary straight line to the bird. We all know what happens next. The dog is either not on the callback list; or, the handler was instructed to pick up the dog. These infractions of the **Rule** ... "in-sight continuously" ... or the agreed convention, must stop. It is a simple fact that handlers cannot handle a dog they cannot see; and Judges cannot judge what they cannot see. The convention, a small number of seconds, permits a dog to pop into view quickly and before it gets too far off line. It also allows Judges more leeway in finding testing sites for blind retrieves.

Apparently, too many Judges think that they have powers to do as they please when setting blind retrieve tests. They cite:

"The Judges, with due regard to the recommendations of the Field Trial Committee, shall determine the tests to be given in each series - ... " (Rules, p. 28.)

They forget those words ... "with due regard to the recommendations of the Field Trial Committee." While most of this **Rule** has to do with the grounds, the FTC can make recommendations concerning tests that are against the **Rules**. This is not the FTC 'planning the test.' That task remains in the hands of the Judges. This is the FTC meeting its obligations.

Judges are reminded of another crucial part of the **Rules** which states: *"The Field Trial Committee and Field Trial Secretary (FTS) shall be held responsible for compliance with ALL of the Field Trial Rules and Procedures except those coming under the sole jurisdiction of the Judges ... " (Rules, p. 8.)*

Remember this: the jurisdiction of the Judges is the setting of tests and the evaluation of dog work. That is their province according to the **Rules**. But, **their tests must conform to the Rules**. Compliance with all the rules comes under the jurisdiction of the FTC. When the FTC recommends, for instance, that a test ought not be conducted because it is unsafe or because it violates a rule, it is not setting a test. It is administering to insure that the **Rules** are not violated or dogs needlessly injured. It is a proper role of the FTC. Because FTCs have not been active in stopping blind retrieve tests that have a dog out of sight for an extended period of time, this abuse of the **Rules** has become exacerbated much to the chagrin of field trial participants. The inactivity and failure to challenge obvious violations by both the FTC and handlers only lends credence to bad blind retrieve testing in which dogs are out of sight far too long. The Judges and the FTC have responsibilities to the breeds, the future of the breeds, and to the AKC.

We urge contestants to file a written complaint with the FTC when a test is in violation of the **Rules**. The FTC is required to meet, discuss the complaint, and render a decision. Their report to the AKC must include the complaint, the FTC proceedings, and the decision. A written complaint should be filed with the FTC prior to the running of the complainant's dog(s). We do NOT encourage unwarranted or feckless complaints.

At the end of a field trial, the Field Trial Secretary submits a report to the AKC. (Rules, p. 16.)

The FTS's report insures the AKC that the club's field trial was in compliance with ALL the **Rules**.³ If clubs permit the **Rules** to be infringed during their field trial, the club could receive discipline from the AKC which can include warnings, fines, probation, or suspension of their trial giving license. IT IS AGAINST THE **RULES** TO TEST DOGS ON A BLIND RETRIEVE WHEN THEY ARE NOT IN-SIGHT CONTINUOUSLY, or, as per the heretofore mentioned "convention." What else needs to be said? Well, evidently quite a bit.

We have both had judging partners who have admitted to us that they had never read the rule book.⁴ For this reason, we are including entire sections of the rules, below, which are concerned with blind retrieves and with how to judge them.

"Response to direction is all-important in handling tests." (Rules, p. 55.)

Handlers must be able to see the dog to handle it. Judges want to see whether a dog responds correctly to commands from the handler. There are six faults mentioned which pertain to blind retrieves.

"Faults, or justifications for penalties, include the following:

- (a) not taking the line originally given by the handler*
- (b) not continuing on that line for a considerable distance*
- (c) stopping voluntarily, i.e., "popping-up" and looking back for directions*
- (d) failure to stop promptly and look to the handler, when signaled*
- (e) failure to take a new direction, i.e., a new cast, when given*
- (f) failure to continue in that new direction for a considerable distance.*

My Dog!



I Cannot See My Dog!

The seriousness of the penalty for any or all of the foregoing faults varies with the seriousness of the infraction, whether that infraction was repeated and how often, and whether there was a combination of various infractions. However, before inflicting a severe penalty because of a dog's failure to stop promptly at the whistle, Judges should determine whether the wind, the cover, or the distance seriously interfered with the dog's ability to hear his handler. In general, the performance in the test should be considered in its entirety; an occasional failure to take and hold a direction may be considered a minor fault, if offset by several other very good responses. A considerable penalty should be imposed for repeated, willful disobedience of the handler's orders; and less penalty when, after taking the proper direction, he does not continue on it as far as the handler desired. Stopping voluntarily, to look back for directions, in an isolated instance, may be considered a minor fault, but frequent repetition may convert such "popping-up" into the category of serious faults." (Rules, p. 55, 58.)

There is more:

"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, pp. 36, 57.)

And:

"A dog which pays no attention to many whistles and directions by his handler can be said to be "out of-control," and, unless in the opinion of the Judges there exist valid mitigating circumstances, should be eliminated from the stake. (Rules, p. 34.)

The **Rules** offer advice for Judges when it comes to setting tests of control ... blind retrieves. Judges, note the highlighted section.

"On 'blind' retrieves, wherever possible, the Judges should plan their tests in such a way that they take advantage of natural hazards, such as islands, points of land, sand bars, ditches, hedges, small bushes, adjacent heavy cover, and rolling terrain. Despite such natural distractions, it should be possible, at least in theory, for a dog to "find" a well-planned blind-retrieve on the initial line from his handler; that he will do so is highly improbable because of those natural hazards, so he must be handled to the "blind." Nevertheless, the test should be so planned that the dog should be "in-sight" continuously. A blind retrieve is a test of control, and a dog which is out of sight for a considerable period (and, we add ... not near to the line to the blind ...) cannot be said to be under control. Utilizing natural hazards should obviate the need for Judges issuing special instructions about the manner of completing a blind retrieve, other than to "get the meat" by the shortest, fastest, or most direct route." (Rules, pp. 43-4.)

Judges look for excellent water blinds for they provide the stoutest tests of control, especially when the prevailing wind is blowing onto a point. Putting a dog onto a point during a water blind and casting it off into the wind while maintaining the line to the blind is a standard test. A strong wind blowing onto the point increases the difficulty exponentially. A dog giving a cast refusal and going off the line and behind the point will likely be out of sight for a considerable time, out of control and will be dropped from further consideration. Some water blinds required a dog to go over a point rather than off the tip out into the water. If the area behind the point is on an imaginary straight line to the blind, or near to it, the dog must be in-sight continuously or nearly so as per the convention. Too many times, this area puts the dog out of sight far too long thereby not providing the handler an opportunity to keep the dog on line by continuing to handle it. This has become a major complaint among handlers of All-Age dogs.

Their dogs go off the point as handled and on line only to go out of sight for an extended period of time and then appear too far off the line.⁵ There are other similar circumstances in blind testing. Too many Judges think that dogs which are out of sight for a long time are not a problem. They have been known to say: 'just handle the dog back onto the line.' These are the same Judges, however, who are quick to dismiss any dog that is off the line when it comes into view. We are adamantly opposed to this kind of thinking as are most all field trialers with whom we have discussed this problem.

The water blind series is a critical point in an All-Age stake. Judges will do well to find extra time to study the grounds and water that is available prior to the start of the series. They should take into consideration, wind directions and possible wind changes. Some diligent work is sometimes necessary before the series begins. The dividends are worth the effort for Judges as the same old tried and tired water blinds at the site can be avoided and new challenges found for these talented retrievers.

If the incidences of blind retrieve tests that have the dog out of sight for too long for a handle to keep them effectively on or near the line are to be reduced, then field trial people will need to step up. When the Judges set tests that violate the **Rules**,

"... it is the duty of any field trialer to report the occurrence to the Field Trial Committee, and the Committee is required to investigate the matter and either deal with it in accordance with the rules or to report in detail to The American Kennel Club."⁶

"The American Kennel Club will support a committee which properly executes its powers, but when a committee fails to fulfill its obligations ... a serious question arises as to whether the club should be allowed to hold future events under AKC rules. In situations where the club fails to meet its obligations, the Board of Directors of The American Kennel Club, after review, may impose a fine or withhold approval of events, or both."⁷

"The future of the sport is going to depend on the extent to which its judges really know good work in the field; know the rules and procedures, and judge strictly in accord with them; demonstrate complete impartiality in their decisions; and act in a manner fitting to the dignity of their position."⁸ It is in the spirit of keeping the integrity of the sport at a high level that we humbly submit this report.⁹ ■

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

² "a few seconds" is defined as a **small number** and suggests in the instances of blind retrieves, any time more than 4-5 seconds is not a small number.

³ Should Judges insist upon a test that is in violation of the **Rules**, the FTC should shut down the test. This can be done by withdrawing the birds and the blind planter. Before matters should ever get to this stage, cordial and warranted discussions should occur between the chair of the FTC and the Judges so that an amicable solution can be reached.

⁴ We cannot even imagine that in any other competitive arena, the judges, referees, or officials would not be conversant with the governing rules of the activity. 'Come on, MAN!'

⁵ This issue has caused so much consternation that some handlers have become rattled and uttered unsportsmanlike comments which then caused them to be "written up." We are not excusing unsportsmanlike conduct in these types of instances. However, proper blind retrieve testing according to the rules insures that incidents of this type never arise.

⁶ See: *THE STATUS of a JUDGE of Licensed Field Trials*. Published by The American Kennel Club.

⁷ *Dealing With Misconduct at The American Kennel Club Events*. January 1, 1995. Published by The American Kennel Club, p. 3.

⁸ *THE STATUS of a JUDGE OF Licensed Field Trials*. *Loc. Cit.*

⁹ Our report is not meant to impugn in any manner the excellent work done by competent Judges which is most of them.