

Evaluating Your Dog Objectively For Advanced Field Work

by Jackie Mertens

Many owners think their dog can be a great field competitor. When asked why, they invariably say he loves to carry underwear around the house, always has something in his mouth, loves to play in his water bucket, lays in any puddle he finds, retrieves the family parakeet, or fights the water hose. None of these statements mean anything in terms of potential to compete successfully in the field.

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Realistically evaluating your dog's potential to compete in field events takes some time and effort. First your dog must be obedience trained enough to be under control when not on leash. He must know come, sit, heel, and stay and must retrieve to hand. If you have done some training in the field, the following list should help determine his potential.

- Is your dog enthusiastic about coming to line and looking out in the field for thrower stations? Will he willingly look at a long station and be willing to retrieve when the thrower is 200 yards away?
- Will he retrieve 3 or 4 times in a row with equal enthusiasm or does he lose interest after the first or second retrieve?
- Does he hunt up a bumper with enthusiasm or is he laxadassical? Does he walk on his hunts and get distracted if he doesn't find the bumper in a few seconds?
- Does he remember the second bird of a double? When he returns with the first retrieve, does he come back to line and eagerly look for the second thrower station?
- Is he willing to swim 100 to 150 yards for a water mark? Will he hunt in the water for a mark? Will he enthusiastically reenter the water on a double retrieve?
- Is he willing to penetrate rough terrain or cover and swim in stick ponds and lily pads?
- Will he hold his line on 200 yard crosswind retrieves?
- Does he remember the area of the fall on marked retrieves and go to the area and hunt there with enthusiasm?
- If you have taught him to handle, will he willingly sit on a whistle and take casts? Will he cast into the wind and the water?
- On blinds is he willing to look out from your side and take a line for 100 or more yards or does he continually bug (look away or up at you)?

If your dog does not pass the above requirements, you can do one of two things. Either you can continue to train and run him to his maximum level, which may be a WCX, Senior Hunter degree or NAHRA title; or you can retire him from field trial events and search for another pup, in hopes of obtaining one with stronger inherited field instincts.

There is nothing wrong with admitting that your dog cannot do advanced field work. Don't make excuses for your dog. Accept him for what he is - a wonderful house pet, couch potato, or baby sitter, a great therapy dog, or a terrific obedience competitor. Be realistic in your evaluation. It will save you many hours of anxiety and frustration.

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