

# A Discussion About Judging

With Theodore Shih and Dennis R. Voigt

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The issues of  
visibility and  
time management  
are universal ...  
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*WE STARTED SPEAKING* with pros and amateurs that we each knew and asked them to comment about judging in our sport.

Among the pros with whom we spoke were: Scott Dewey, Bill Eckett, Danny Farmer, Karl Gunzer, Bart Peterson, Dave Rorem, Bill Sargenti, Bill Schrader, Kenny Trott, Kevin Cheff, Chuck Dygos, Rick Roberts, Mike Lardy, Pat Burns and Ray Voigt. Among the amateurs we spoke to were: Glenda Brown, Charlie Hays, Larry Morgan, Mitch Patterson, Jeff Warren, Judy Rasmuson, Richard Dresser and Duncan Christie.

We asked each of the people listed above the following two questions:

**Question 1:** What are three areas where you think field trial judging could be most improved?

**Question 2:** What do you believe would be the best way to improve judging?

Frankly, we found the responses to the first question to be surprisingly basic. Almost to a person, the respondents told us that:

1. The dogs need to see the gunners in the field.
2. The dogs need to see the birds in the air.
3. The handlers need to be able to see their dogs at critical spots in land and water blinds.
4. Judges need to exercise better time management.



There seems to be a general feeling that many tests – particularly in the large Opens – have situations where the dogs cannot readily see the gunners and the birds, and handlers cannot see their dogs at critical moments. In many cases, this appeared to be either purposeful design or, at least, failure by the judges to pay adequate attention to ensuring visibility. It is believed that better time management would improve the quality of field trials.

## MARKS

In marking tests, the consensus is that in many tests:

- The gunners are obscure because of poor lighting, extreme distances, bad background or only a small portion of gunners was visible. Backlighting, where the sun is behind the gunner, was commonly observed. In other cases, gunners were in the shadows for part of the day and at other times in bright sunshine. Gunners at extreme distances and tight to shorter more prominent gunners were very hard for the dogs to detect.
- The birds are obscure because of poor lighting, bad background, extreme distances or optical illusions which prevent the dogs from seeing/judging the area of the fall.

There also is a widespread belief that more and more tests – again, most predominantly in the large Opens – are designed so that even if the guns and dogs are visible, that the mechanics of the test are such

that the dogs are distracted from marking the birds. This may be the result of:

- Gunners retiring a long way from where they throw.
- Gunners moving in a prominent way while other birds were going down or prominently moving when the dog is released for a retrieve.
- Short close in birds (usually fliers) shot early to prevent the dogs from focusing on a long retired bird shot later and tight to the flyer station.

Dave Rorem expressed the sentiment of many of our respondents when he said:

“To me the single biggest problem with judging lately has been the willingness of judges to eliminate dogs based on the ‘controllable’ mechanics at trials. These mechanics are dictating the difficulty of the tests more than the bird placement or terrain. Meaning: Gunners or birds not visible on marks; the deliberate desire of keeping the gunners hidden in the shade for the entire day; the confusing order of shooting the birds so as to have the dog go back and forth across other gunners.

What seems to be becoming more popular is that the difficulty of the tests are based more on whether you can see the mark, instead of making sure the dogs can see it and let’s try to find the best dog at remembering and finding it!”

Richard Dresser basically said the same thing when he stated, “judg-

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ees seem to be too focused on distance” and “they use order of fall and tightness to make tests difficult rather than good bird placement.” Bill Sargenti also believed that many “judges use distance as a crutch.”

Danny Farmer succinctly summarized things this way: “We are seeing too many tests with weak mechanics and poor marks.”

### BLINDS

On Blinds, a common sentiment was that too often dogs were out of sight at critical moments or places and the handler was unable to do anything but sit and wait for 10 seconds or more. Our respondents believed – almost to a person – that judges are deliberately constructing blinds where the dogs are out of sight for extended periods of time during key portions of the blind so that most of the dogs are essentially out of the test when they come back in sight and will be eliminated from the trial.

In the same vein, many respondents expressed concern over the number of blinds that they are running in competition where the dogs cannot see the handler and/or cannot hear the whistle. Mike Lardy talked about how it also seemed that just as soon as new “mega” whistles appeared the judges respond with longer and longer blinds. The endings of many blinds are at the extreme of visibility of the dog and its ability to hear. It’s not unlike the “Weapons’ Race!” Both Kenny Trott and Mitch Patterson echoed Mike’s thoughts.

There is also an undercurrent of sentiment that when judges have difficulty creating separation with their marks that they overreact with the blind design or scoring of their blinds. Judges set up ‘In or Out’ – ‘Get Cast or Not’ blinds where they can easily eliminate the dogs. Examples included tight keyholes where one poor cast and you are out, or blinds where the dogs are out of sight for extended periods making recovery highly unlikely. One example was a white decoy around the corner when the dog was barely visible. Related, some respondents felt that judges were far too quick to make the endings of blinds hard to see, poorly marked, or located too close to an out-of-sight hazard (such as the back edge of a dyke). In many situations, the perceived intention of the judges appeared to be “remove or hamper the handler’s ability to correct his/her dog’s line and handle at critical moments.”

Mike Lardy observed that judges appear to use arbitrary criteria to eliminate dogs especially on blinds. He thought that if there are hazards or unclear parameters and the judges are looking for a particular performance, the handlers all ought to be informed. He also noted that evaluation of performance at trials can be over influenced by our training methods and standards (true for both marks and blinds). He suggested a need for a more “holistic” evaluation. Perhaps that is similar to our discussion in an earlier article of trying to find the all-around, overall best performer without getting preoccupied with one particular deviation or mistake.

### TIME MANAGEMENT

Again, our respondents universally expressed the belief that judges could be better at time management. By this, they mean:

- Judges take too long to set up their tests
- Judges set up tests that are too time consuming for the conditions or size of the field

- Judges take too long on their callbacks
- Judges waste time during the running of a series

The general belief is that when time management is poor, the tests become increasingly arbitrary, and the callbacks unreasonably severe as judges struggle to complete their stake on time.

### CALLBACKS

Callbacks and Time management seemed strongly linked in the eyes of many.

Chuck Dygos emphasized the point that callbacks start to suffer before the trial even begins when judges spend too much to get the test started. While this is not always the judges’ fault, a good judge can identify this problem quickly (even on setup day) and react accordingly.

Richard Dresser felt strongly that judges seem really hesitant to have generous callbacks. He cited numerous occasions when his co-judge wanted to bring back far fewer dogs than he did. This seemed to happen when more dogs did the test than expected and entries were large. It appears a lot of judges are just “nervous” about dealing with large numbers. Again, he thought wise use of time and not wasting it would allow much more generous callbacks. Judges that spend time arguing over 3-4 dogs could have easily brought those dogs back and still have more time left.

We found it interesting that our respondents did not mention concerns over “political” callbacks or placements. Yet, this is often an issue discussed among small private groups. When we queried some of our respondents on this, they suggested that a lot of the questionable callbacks or placements are not due to politics but rather due either to honest differences in opinion or weak evaluation. They felt that most judges are doing the best that they can every weekend but that sometimes a trial simply doesn’t work out. Reasons were more obvious in hindsight where everybody gets 20:20 vision!

However, a number of our respondents expressed exasperation over inconsistent callbacks. For example, in a given Field Trial, Dog A and Dog B had similar work. Dog A gets dropped and Dog B gets carried. Or in Field Trial X, all dogs that do “Z” on a test are dropped. But, in Field Trial Y, all dogs that exhibit the same conduct are carried. Our respondents would like to see more consistency within a particular trial and also, from one trial to another.

In line with what Judy Rasmuson mentions later in a sidebar, Bill Sargenti says that he would like to be able to ask a judge why a given dog was dropped – not to argue with the judge, but simply for his own information. Bill says that more and more, judges are unwilling to tell contestants why their dogs were dropped.

### IMPROVEMENT

*What can be done to make things better?*

There is a general belief that we need to make a more concentrated effort at educating judges. Most respondents believed that judging clinics and videos would be helpful. A number of our respondents said that they wished that more judges read the Rule Book and the Blue Book before their judging assignments.

However, there is a widespread belief that evaluating dog performance – the focus of most judging clinics – is not as much of a challenge as understanding bird placement. That is, it is easy to judge the dogs when you have a good test that creates separation among the dogs. The hard part is creating the test that creates separation and is fair through-

## When You Lay an Egg, Learn to Make an Omelet

Judy Rasmuson, Madison, FL

No matter how careful you are, there are judging assignments that simply don't go right. Sometimes the reasons are beyond your control – disastrous weather, co-judge from hell. Sometimes the reasons just pile up – huge entry, flat field, no water, unintended blind results, poor shooters, fast birds, easy marks, etc. But no matter how the fiasco unfolds, there are ways in which you can lessen the chances of a “laid egg.” Most of this revolves around self education.

The first judging assignment I had was with John Russell. It was a Qualifying at the Women's spring trial. John turned to me after we had run 5 dogs and asked me what I would change. He said it is a rare test that is perfect and hindsight critique makes for better judging. So, here is my betterment list that has evolved since that cold, rainy day on the Eastern Shore.

**Setup day** Besides all the good things that Ted Shih and Dennis have talked about, anticipate the bad gunning, the wimpy throws, the dogs eating your lunch in the first series. Don't rely on winging it as the stake goes on. Plan the whole trial. Spend as much time on setting up the water marks as you do the land marks. Talk with your co-judge about all aspects of the trial. This is your chance for you and your co-judge to plan.

**Time Management** If your schedule is blown to smithereens by your marshal's insouciance, don't get angry. Be polite as you push for more efficiency but double down on your own time management. Have the next dog coming to line as running dog leaves or gets to the honour. Ensure that you have the guns up and waiting when the last bird is delivered. Be ready to go as the re-bird is finished. Give your marshal clear instructions for the next series before your current series is over. Have quick and accurate callbacks.

**During the Trial** Ask yourself after you have run 5-10 dogs what would you change? Is it mechanics or bird placement? Are the birds and guns as visible as you thought they would be? Should you have cut down more cover for better visibility of the dog? This review list is endless from minor to major concerns. Setting up tests is about weighing options and making choices. There are always trade-offs. The field with the better cover has less terrain and distance; another field has better options with a wind shift but fewer places to hide the bird. How are your choices working out once you start running dogs? What would you change? Is it mechanics or bird placement? Are the guns and birds as visible as you thought? Can you see the dogs working?

**After the Trial** This is the time to critique your test and ask yourself some questions. Which was the most useful test? Why? Think about time used versus dog separation gained. Think about the time used versus the dog separation. Was the separation for legitimate reasons? Would you have understood why you were dropped if you had been running? When asked by the marshal, I feel strongly that a judge needs to respond with the reasons why a dog is dropped. A judge needs to be able to explain his reasons and not hide behind a shield of omnipotence.

Which was the least useful test and why? Did it use too much time? Did you get the wrong kind of answers? Too tight? Too long? Good dogs looked bad and marginal dogs looked good? Did you admire the dog that won? Is this a dog that you would like to have taken home with you? If the answer is yes – what was in the tests that allowed the cream to rise? If the answer is no – what was in the tests that rewarded behaviour that you don't like? I judged an Open in which we set up a triple land blind. At the end, I was unhappy with the weight that the blinds had on the placements. Good lesson to learn. Don't put in birds that you don't want to judge.

What surprised you in the tests? Did a hard bird not work as well as you thought? And did a throw away bird get more action than anticipated? Why? Did the blinds work the way you planned? Did a blind reward a handler with multiple dogs or, put another way, was a single dog handler at a distinct disadvantage? Did you like the way your time management worked? Start on time, finished before dark? Ease of change over to next series? Efficient use of setup day? Could you have been more decisive? Were dogs sufficiently tested? Were all series a factor? Was it a one bird trial?

**Later Hindsight** About a week later, look over your judging sheets to see if you think that the placements were correct. No one is looking over your shoulder. Be honest. Separations might not be as evident anymore. I've found myself going back to the rule book and rereading passages on natural and trained abilities, weighing the importance of each thing as accuracy, style, manners, perseverance, hunts and handles. The placing of 3rd, 4th and RJ is often times about splitting hairs. But regardless, you need to develop standards to weigh the apples and oranges that confront you at the end of a trial. Each judging assignment gives you the chance to work on your standards, using the rule book as your basis. These standards will follow you through your judging career and will help you with equitable callbacks as well as the final judgments.

### **In hindsight.**

Listen to what people say to you about the trial that you judged. This feedback will be sparse and heavily weighted towards the people that are unhappy with your judgment. You don't need to argue but think about where the kernel of truth lies.

Lastly, think about the arc of the stake. Did you call back as many dogs as you thought you had time to judge? Would you have liked to have run this trial? As a contestant, I like the last series to be another turn of the wheel, a chance to rise to the top. Maybe this is because I rarely come into the last series in perfect shape and I crave another shot at the blue. As a judge, I tend to keep this in mind. Oftentimes, I'll suggest to my co-judge that we do a quicker blind, call back more dogs but have time for a bigger set of water marks. This seems to end in a more satisfying trial than letting two sets of big blinds be the gate keeper for who is going to get the last series.

With all the pitfalls that happen along the judging path, there are many rewards, with knowledge being one. This knowledge is gained from many sources not the least of which is failure. Every test isn't going to work as planned. Don't be afraid to try something new or innovative. So be willing to embrace the lessons that are presented

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out the day. Chuck Dygos felt judges could do more to even the test for early and late running dogs if they paid more attention to the effect of changing conditions during the day that can be predicted. Examples are heat build-up in the day, scenting and drag back build-up and changing lighting conditions. We know it's a big challenge with large entries and all-day tests but are judges giving such issues adequate consideration?

We found it interesting that Judy Rasmuson responded to our survey not by listing the "what's wrong" items described above. Instead, she emphasized how judges can improve their assignments by self-assessment. Judges need to learn from their mistakes and how to do better when things go wrong. Her submission is basically a set of guidelines on "How you can improve yourself and your judging assignment." Or, in other words, "learn to make omelets instead of laying rotten eggs." We have included it here in its entirety here as a Sidebar.

In a similar vein to Judy's quest for education, many of the professionals expressed their need to invest more time in educating their clients in bird placement and test construction. Bill Schrader suggested that clubs – in addition to having judging clinics – put on bird placement clinics.

Dennis Bath believes that the educational process could be facilitated if clubs insisted on having an eight point judge paired with a novice judge in the minors.

Both Dennis Bath and Mitch Patterson believe that the standard for judging the All-Age Stakes needs to be more stringent. However, they differ in their approaches.

Dennis believes that judges should spend more time judging in the minor stakes (alongside 8 point judges) before they move up to the All-Age Stakes. In Dennis' opinion, aspiring judges need to learn more about the fundamentals of judging in the minor stake before moving up to the major stakes. Richard Dresser echoed the same belief that you have to pay your dues. In contrast, Mitch would increase the total number of points needed from both judges to preside over a major stake from 8 to 16. Like Dennis, Mitch thinks that the judges need to be more battle tested.

Duncan Christie identified that selection and pairing of judges was often critical in determining whether a trial was weak or strong. Interestingly, when asked what was the result of having two "weak" judges, he cited all the above major issues as occurring. Some clubs have people selecting judges that do not know whether the pair of judges would be compatible, whether they are both current and truly qualified, and whether they have the same bias or are conversely incompatible. Bill Sargenti also felt more thought needed to be given to the selection and pairing of judges.

A number of professionals suggested the clubs ought to consider utilizing a pro as a trial consultant. That is, a pro would be on site on set up day and throughout the trial to answer any questions that the judges might have in constructing the tests. The judges would not be required to use the consultant's services, but would be able to ask them for input if they choose. One of us (DRV) has judged a trial where the resident Professional was there as Chairman throughout setup. The input on suitable places to run from, lighting conditions, visibility of dogs and gunners, hazards and likely performance of dogs, areas not previously used and more was incredibly valuable. The problem, of course, is finding a pro who is familiar with the grounds and is either not running the trials or at least would not provide information that favoured their dogs

training experience at that site. Some of our respondents felt that the use of a professional as a consultant was inappropriate and unnecessary – that field trial committees should be able to assist the judges without the need for additional help.

## Safety of Dogs

The issues of visibility and time management were universal as described earlier. It surprised us a little that the Top Three rarely included the safety of the dogs and attention to hazards. When we asked respondents about this they invariably responded with the attitude that "Safety goes without Saying" and should always be an automatic priority. Kevin Cheff did identify safety as a number one issue. He felt that there were simply too many tests designed where the judges did not thoroughly inspect the field for hazards. In addition, many judges did not consider some hazards as significant. Perhaps that was because they themselves did not have those super hard chargers. Or, perhaps it is because really serious injuries such as broken necks have not occurred enough to scare people. Those who have experienced serious accidents at a trial know how devastating it is. Kevin wisely identified that it is common for dogs to sustain smaller injuries such as soft tissue damage, partial tears of ligaments and tendons while navigating treacherous terrain. These injuries surface later as major career threatening injuries. While not all injuries can be avoided in any performance sport, judges need to pay much more attention to hidden hazards, holes, ditches and cover patches that cause tumbles. At a recent Conditioning and Injury Rehab Seminar, a major take home lesson was that "no lameness is insignificant." How many times we have seen dogs limping after a test! Let's not underestimate the importance of safety in improving our judging.

## Where Have We Been and Where Are We Going?

Ted: Dennis, I have to say that I really enjoyed doing this article because it gave me an opportunity to speak with many of my friends about something that all of us hold dear – the betterment of our sport.

I was surprised with the uniformity of responses that we received. I was surprised with – for lack of a better word – the "fundamental" quality of people's concerns. Just think about it – our respondents uniformly told us that what they would most like to be changed at field trials is:

- They want the dogs to see the guns.
- They want the dogs to see the birds.
- They want to be able to see their dogs at critical points in both marks and blinds.
- They want good time management.

How much more basic can you get? That these were the primary issues tells me that the sport has some work to do at a foundational level if we are to improve our judging.

I was impressed with the passion that our respondents expressed in our conversations and encouraged by the energy people displayed when we discussed this article with them.

As we were going back and forth on this article, I was reading the November-December 2010 issue of Retrievers ONLINE, specifically the article on "Laying an Egg While Judging," and I was taken by the correlation between the things we mentioned in that article and the comments that we received from our respondents. I think that correlation speaks to the fact that many of us are seeing the same things across the country.

Some of the things that I would like to touch on in the future are:

*What does the Rule Book say about the concerns our respondents expressed?*

*What can judges do to manage time efficiently during a field trial?*

*What can we do to improve judging?*

Perhaps more importantly – and, of course, most difficult – I think we need to address the nuts and bolts of setting up marks and blinds.

I am interested in what you think and, of course, what our readers think? Where should we go next?

Dennis: I agree that this survey has had rather remarkable unanimity. There has been a strong echo of things we have said in previous issues even though not all respondents are Retrievers ONLINE readers. I wondered how biased our survey was because it certainly was not a random sample or even a large sample of trialers. Instead, it was a group of people prominent in the game and whom we respected, knew and were able to contact and be able to discuss such topics in the past month or so. Nonetheless, the responses are remarkable in their fundamental nature.

Certainly, in past articles, I thought we had carefully identified judging approaches and philosophies based on the Rule Book and experienced input only to find that many others had different viewpoints, or continued to espouse other ideas. We sure don't profess to have all the answers but it's frustrating when fundamentals can't be adhered to or agreed upon. The Rule Book does give much latitude for different viewpoints but we shouldn't be totally at odds in judging things like lines to the Derby marks, the seriousness of a "pop" and "what is a good hunt."

I think everybody's biggest challenge is how to improve judging in general and judging by themselves in particular. Improvement means quality tests that don't illustrate the problems identified here, consistency of callbacks and more uniformity on evaluation. So, I agree a starting point would be to identify what the Rule Book says about the major problems identified by our respondents (incidentally, as we go to print we are still getting more responses). It would also be good to prepare a summary of how to improve time management because that is clearly another key.

I think we could end up with a list of Fundamentals of Judging.

As I said above, everybody needs to tackle the subject of how to improve judging. Judy's sidebar is a great start because it starts with each of us as individuals. In future articles, we can start to discuss the nuts and bolts of setting up blinds and marks. That is a huge topic and one that I think is best done in the field and I think it should be the focus of most judging seminars. But I also know that there are a bunch of ideas we

could collect to illustrate how judges can design good bird placement.

In summary, I think everybody has to also be thinking about ways to improve the game overall and what they can do to help. Some lateral thinking is needed on dealing with huge entries, dwindling grounds, using experienced and developing inexperienced judges and even how we conduct our typical trials. Mike Lardy responded that "due to the parity in dog ability and training these days, it seems that results are often because of random events rather than ability." I think that is true and one of the reasons why judging has become so difficult. He suggested one solution was to abandon the 4 series model in large events in order to have more opportunities to evaluate each dog. That needs discussion along with other "outside the box" thoughts.

As always, we invite your feedback and we hope to continue with these topics in the Spring issue. Our sincere thanks to those that participated to date. We will be talking to more of you as we develop these topics. ■

*This article was originally published in the Winter 2011 Issue of Retrievers ONLINE magazine. For further information, see [www.retrieveronline.com](http://www.retrieveronline.com). As always feedback is appreciated.*

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## Dennis Voigt – Retrievers ONLINE

Dennis Voigt is the co-editor of Retrievers ONLINE with Fiona McKay. This article is a reprint from the March-April 2008 issue of their magazine and typical of the articles that focus on training, handling, judging and health issues of working retrievers. You can get further information about ONLINE, now a quarterly magazine, at [www.retrieveronline.com](http://www.retrieveronline.com).

As an amateur who trains his own dogs, Dennis has had multiple field champions (both sides of the border) and finished many Canadian Nationals including 3 National wins. He has trained with or studied top professionals and amateurs but like other amateurs often trains alone during the summer. His DVD and book, *Training Retrievers Alone*, is available at [www.ybsmedia.com](http://www.ybsmedia.com). Occasionally, he gives judging or training workshops.

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