

Line

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

IT HAS BECOME INCREASINGLY EVIDENT that some Judges have not followed the Rules scrupulously with respect to the requirements for penalties concerning line manners and obedience. Certain issues have become apparent not the least of which is owner or handler confrontations with Judges. A situation frequently experienced by Judges of late, is that more handlers or owners than usual wish to approach them for an explanation after a severe penalty invoking elimination from the stake has been assessed. The handler or owner will generally state that the behavior in question has not been so severely penalized by Judges at other trials. This will be discussed below.

It is important to note that no explanation or reasons are required to be given by the Judges after they have dropped a dog from further consideration in a stake. When an inquiry is properly received from the Marshal, the Judges need only to review their notes and determine whether a mistake was made. The Judges are not required by any Rule to provide reasons or explanations for their decision.

If a handler desires an explanation and asks the Marshal for permission to approach the Judges, and they agree to meet with the handler, one of the Judges should explicitly state that the discussion must proceed in a sportsmanlike manner or the handler could be charged with unsportsmanlike conduct. It is important to note as well that in some instances of this kind, which are unusual, the Judges may provide reasons to a handler, should they desire, for the purpose of educating the handler or owner with respect to the Rules.

Our experience has been that loud barking, for example, on the line or on the way to the line, or to a retrieve, has not been penalized by some Judges thereby precipitating the behavior mentioned above. When handlers experience Judges at subsequent trials who do assess penalties for loud barking, the handlers/owners can become frustrated, to say the least. The lack of continuity in penalties was not precipitated by the handlers. We are urging Judges to be more discerning with respect to line manners and the Rules pertaining to them. Judge what is observed according to the Rules.

Another example has to do with the obedience of dogs in the holding blind, as they leave the holding blind, and as they approach the line where they are to sit tractably until given further instructions by the handler. In too many instances, dogs are not penalized for not walking at heel, refusing to sit after several commands from the handler, jumping about, going forward of the line, and thereby indicating a lack of refinement as required in all-age stakes. When handlers see that this behavior has been allowed to slip without penalty, they are likely to inquire or attempt to approach the Judges when other Judges do indeed assess penalties for the same behavior. The Rules include a listing of faulty behaviors that are considered severe, moderate, or minor in nature. All involved with field trials for retriever breeds need to be cognizant of them.

Judges are actually doing trainers a favor when they invoke the Rules and assess penalties for repetitive line manner failures. Thereby, without

intent, the Judges are identifying issues to be addressed in training. By no means are we suggesting that suddenly Judges should start eliminating or penalizing dogs pell-mell for line manner infractions. There are some long held and understood standards that should be respected and continued. For example, a high powered, excited, and stylish dog exhibiting desire to retrieve, and that comes quickly under control on the line, is not generally heavily penalized for line manner infractions. This behavior can reflect style, a trait explicitly mentioned in the Rules as desirable. There are, however, times when serious line manner faults must be addressed for the good of the enterprise. Judges should advise handlers in such instances that the dog's faulty behavior is reaching a point where elimination may be the penalty.

For clarity concerning line manners, it is worth reviewing the Rules that apply to all-age stakes, the source of which was **Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers**. Amended to October 2015, Published by The American Kennel Club. To wit:

- “... contestants ... should be familiar with and governed ... by the ... Standard.” (p. 27.) Please read the Rules. We read them prior to every judging assignment which for us numbers over 300. We know that most other Judges do the same. We continue to discover nuances in the Rules which are important considerations when Judging. Read the Rules!
- “He [the dog] should sit quietly on line or in the blind, walk at heel, or assume any station designated by his handler until sent to retrieve.” (p. 32.) Judges are required to note deviations from this Rule, which could become important when summing results.
- “Retrievers that bark or whine on line ... should be penalized. Loud and prolonged barking ... is sufficient cause to justify elimination from the stake.” (p.33.) This particular fault is one that some judges have NOT penalized AT ALL. Barking, when minor or moderate in nature, could affect callbacks if repeated and could also effect placements. Severe barking requires elimination from the stake. It is the failure by some Judges to penalize repeated loud barking, and other serious line manner infractions, which has led to more inquiries for Judges who do penalize appropriately. Another result is that unsportsmanlike like behavior on the part of handlers/owners has occurred and these reflect poorly upon retriever field trials and are to be avoided.
- “There is unlimited opportunity for an honest difference of opinion about the severity of the penalty to assess for any given infraction or deviation from perfect work.” (p. 41.) This portion of the Rules applies to differences of opinion between Judges as they are the ones who “assess” a penalty. It is not a difference of opinion between Judges and handlers or owners. This distinction is an important one.

It is worth commenting that most Judges are fully aware of these problems. As field trials have continued to grow in number and entries

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have increased, more Judges have been recruited and some are continuing to develop their judging skills. Perhaps this discussion will be worthwhile for some of them.

- *“Therefore, there must always be the possibility of owners and handlers being confused and dismayed because their dog is dropped from further competition ... due to faults which other Judges at other trials had not so severely penalized.” (p. 41.)* Or, when Judges have not penalized serious line manner faults at all, the confusion about penalties for line manners at various field trials only increases among handlers and owners, especially among those not familiar with the Rules.
- *“There should be expectation of full refinement in acquired attributes in those stakes carrying championship points.” (p. 54.)* i.e. ... NO BARKING! Creeping, jumping after birds, and the like should be noted in the Judges’ books. Penalties for barking and other line manner infractions could effect placements for the Judges in all-age stakes are seeking a finished dog with respect to both natural AND acquired abilities.

- *“Serious Faults: No. 11. Loud and prolonged whining or barking.” (p. 57.)* These are serious faults, which justify elimination from the stake. The key here is LOUD and or prolonged barking if elimination is invoked.

It is our desire to put handlers whose dogs have been trained to be obedient and have good line manners in proper perspective. They can suffer in summing when dogs lacking these traits are not penalized.

We also urge all Judges and trainers to give careful attention to the Rules governing line manners. Essentially, there is no substitute for judging experience and for the knowledge that comes from reading the Rules in the “Standard” and supplement and being conversant with them. This practice, alone, will lead to greater uniformity in the “evaluation of dog work.” (p. 40.)

Judges will not begin to think exactly alike with respect to line manners and the penalties associated with faulty line manners. However, we think that greater uniformity concerning line manners is needed and is possible. ■



Photo by Molly Schlachter