

Introduction

This essay is intended to improve field trial judging in one of its most basic aspects ... obedience. Obedience issues when coming to, on, and leaving the line are reviewed and examples given. The rules pertaining to them are provided. The need to note and score the frequently observed faults and failures is stressed. Shortcomings in judgment and failures by judges to properly score basic obedience are addressed. All scenarios presented herein were multiple occurrences of actual events.

Basic Obedience and Line Manners

Judges should not ignore rules associated with obedience, especially as they apply to an all-age dog. Dogs fail the basic obedience requirements sometimes even prior to being sent to retrieve the first bird. Dogs should be obedient at all times.

Dogs are to walk tractably at heel, assume and stay at a designated position when on-line and remain quietly beside the handler after delivery. [Rules, p. 54.]

Tractably means easily managed. Judges need to be more completely aware of the “control” requirement in an all-age dog. Dogs have won stakes when not under control. Some judges are simply unaware of the rules. Others do not care about these parts of the rules and put emphasis, generally speaking, upon marks and blinds alone. Penalties are not assessed for poor obedience, lack of control and faulty line manners.

Handlers working to assist their dogs in locating a gunner who is difficult to see and in so doing must reposition and coax their dogs several times should not be penalized when the problem was caused by the judges. They put the gunner way out there, sometimes in shadows, alone, wearing a dirty white shirt. Give the dogs time to find the guns before signaling for the throws.

... the Guns shall be so stationed as to be conspicuous to and easily identified by the dog. [Rules, pp. 29-30.]

Deliver Promptly and Tenderly

Occasionally a dog will return with a retrieve and not deliver the bird TENDERLY or PROMPTLY. These two requirements are defined as ... WITHOUT DELAY and IMMEDIATELY. A dog was instructed to “leave it” (drop) far too many times not to have been severely penalized. Sometimes the handler, in a desperate attempt to get the bird, turns away from the judges to avoid detection and gives a sharp tug on the bird snatching it from the dog’s mouth. Other times, the handler does a back handed bird pass of sorts keeping the dog between himself and the judge. The judge must elevate the bird to keep the dog, now snapping at the snatched bird, from grabbing it or the judge’s hand. No dog should win an all-age stake after such a display. Should dogs exhibiting these kinds of performances ever have been permitted to compete in every series or considered for any award? The answer is ... NO!

Upon returning, he should deliver the bird promptly and tenderly to his handler ... A dog that is unwilling to release a bird on delivery should be penalized, and if compelled to do so by severe methods, shall, unless in the opinion of the Judges there exist valid mitigating circumstances (a badly damaged bird), be eliminated. [Rules, p. 36.]

Refusal to release a bird on delivery for an unreasonable period of time or until compelled to do so by serious methods (a sharp, pulling tug) ... [Rules, p. 57.]

Basic Commands

A dog rushes to the line ahead of the handler who then voices numerous commands for the dog to “sit.” Other times, the handler leaves the

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holding blind and orders the dog to stay therein or nearby. The handler marches to the line and then calls the dog. This kind of attempt to restrain an unruly dog demonstrates a complete lack of control. The dog would not walk at heel and this fault was NOT acknowledged by the judges. Several more moments were needed to bring the dog under control. No apparent penalties resulted. The dog placed ahead of dogs with good marks, blinds and line manners. This is not acceptable judging when it ignores basic obedience requirements which can add, when repeated, to a failure.

Control is closely allied to the dog’s response to direction, but it also includes obedience at all times. [See Rules, p. 54.]

Creeping

A dog comes to the line and while the birds are being thrown it creeps as far as 25 feet from the line. Eventually it wins the stake. This is NOT creeping and certainly not steadiness on the line. It is a BREAK! Repeated creeping of lesser distances are faults which can add to penalties already incurred. Judges, in your pretrial discussions, reach agreement upon a reasonable distance beyond which you shall determine that a dog has broken. Consider a marker placed at that distance to ensure that your attitude with respect to creeping is discernible to handlers. Most judges think that a fair and conservative estimate of the distance should be no more than three dog lengths which is about ten feet. Beyond that, it is a break as the dog is absolutely not steady. The requirement for steadiness is of the utmost importance. Steadiness has a safety factor component for dogs also used to hunt game birds when not trialing. Unsteadiness must be judged, noted, and penalized according to the rules. It is incumbent on judges to determine what is tolerable and distances being permitted for creeping defy the “steady” concept in the rule book.

A stylish dog came to the line and as the birds were being thrown it whined for a noticeable amount of time. Worse, it barked loudly a few times too. The judges looked at each other. They knew this behavior was a violation of the rules. However, the dog was recalled for each series and continued to demonstrate the same behavior and eventually placed in the stake. Where in the rules is it suggested that judges can ignore any fault and give preference only to a dog’s performance on blinds and marks? NOWHERE!!!

Serious faults: Loud prolonged whining or barking; ... [Rules, pp. 55-57.]

Heel Tractably

When called, a dog rushed from the holding blind to somewhere near the line beating the handler there by leaps and bounds. The handler, yelling “heel,” took considerable time to bring the dog under control.

Manners

Revisited

There were inadequate penalties assessed for this behavior. The dog placed ahead of others with excellent line manners, good marks and blinds. Dogs under control were not credited for their line manners. Judges should not be placing dogs with major faults in basic obedience and line manners when there are dogs that have exhibited good obedience and have performed equally well on the marks and blinds.

... noisy or frequent restraining of a dog on-line by his handler, except in extraordinary circumstances, is sufficient cause to justify elimination of the dog from the stake. [Rules, p. 55]

The “Sit” Command

As mentioned, there are judges who only score marks and blinds and pay little or no attention whatsoever to the skills and behaviors that refine a field trial retriever. “Sit” for example, is one of the very first commands a young dog learns. If this order is properly instilled, a dog will plant its butt quickly when commanded. There will be no begging routine to accomplish this simple task. The same can be said for walking at heel. High powered dogs should not receive allowances for failure to sit or walk at heel upon command. Style as a highly desirable trait does not in any way connote lack of control. Many outstanding and stylish so called “power dogs” come proudly to the line and quickly sit and remain in that position until further commanded.

Judges, be reminded of this often forgotten rule that, if used as intended, will cause trainers to ensure that basic training is adequately completed and also that sufficient time is spent in correcting line manner faults.

Judges shall have the power to turn out of the stake any dog which does not obey its handler ... [Rules, p. 37.]

This is a severe penalty and requires that judges review the facts carefully before invoking it.

Record Basic Faults

A handler was called to the line and the dog raced to the line well ahead of him. Another handler stepped into the holding blind. The judges told the handler coming to the line to return to the holding blind and ‘come to the line like a gentleman with your dog at heel.’ The handler already in the holding blind said to the judges: ‘hey, I am in the holding blind. You have books in your hands. Why don’t you judge what you see? I do not get any extra credit for coming to the line under control so why give dogs with obedience problems a second chance?’ This was an excellent point made by a professional handler.

Handlers have been taking advantage of the currency in judging which has often been to avoid penalizing dogs with poor line manners. Judges should consider a dog’s reluctance to obey commands like “here,” “heel,” and “sit” with penalties similar to those imposed, for example, on

cast refusals. During the final summing, a minor fault may have no significance. That cannot be known in advance so record all faults.

Judges should keep sufficiently detailed notes on each dog’s performance to enable them to recall it completely, or at least its outstanding features. Each fault should be noted, EVEN THOSE THAT ARE MINOR. (Emphasis supplied.) Although the latter may not require that a dog be penalized at that time, repetitions of that fault or commission of various other faults, in succeeding series, may cause the total of faults to assume serious proportions. [Rules, p. 47.]

Attention to this proviso in the rules will assist judges in scoring line manner faults.

Conclusion

The Rules were written to assure that winners, placed dogs, and those with merit, are dogs which represent the best of the breeds and which are a reflection of the finest the field trial community has to offer. They should be animals for which The American Kennel Club can be justifiably proud when awarding, at appropriate times, a championship title. The kinds of shenanigans mentioned herein do not meet that criterion especially when a dog with obviously poor obedience and line manners sufficient for elimination is placed in a championship stake. Dogs awarded all-age points should represent refinement in the qualities required by the rules including those pertaining to basic obedience.

At many field trials, there are complaints about dogs with poor line manners which apparently were not penalized. We were surprised by the numbers of handlers complaining about these issues. Some requested us to address them again. Handlers think that it is time for judges to perform their roles accurately by recording all accomplishments and faults for each dog and then addressing and reviewing them when summing for callbacks, winners, placements and meritorious work.

The severity of any penalty which is a breach of obedience rules is in the judges’ bailiwick. Actions with respect thereto are observed by handlers many of whom are excellent judges themselves. Judges lacking experience learn, for better or worse, what judges with books in their hands do. This is an incentive to perform according to the rules as one day those inexperienced judges may be judging your dogs. ■

Notes:

Rules references were taken from **Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers: Including Standing Recommendations of the Retriever Advisory Committee and the Supplement in the Standard Procedure**. Amended to November 2017. Published by the American Kennel Club.

See also: Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan. “Line Manners.” *Retriever News*. Vol. 9, No. 6, September 2016, pp. 54-55.