

THE Field Trial

Sport

By Ken Thorson

The field trial sport has been changing for years. Some of these changes have been good and others are concerning. Tradition is slowly losing sway, and a new wave of trainers is making progress in our sport. The new trend is a move to individuality or concern for one's self. A competitor's effort to get ahead has always existed, but with the growth of interest and influx of new ideas, our sport is changing.

We Field Trialers are considered sportsmen by the AKC and as such, have a responsibility to the sport. This responsibility includes fairness, ethics, respect, courtesy, and a sense of fellowship with other Trialers. Most of the field trial trainers do not receive remuneration for their efforts and only want a fair chance to have fun and to compete on a level playing field. But today there are things happening that are giving a bad taste towards this level of sport.

For years, trainers have had difficulty finding appropriate training grounds. This has continued, but with a twist. As most field trialers know, the field trial game evolved from hunting and competition in some form of hunt test. But with the evolution of time came a gradual requirement for different and bigger training grounds. In the past, most trainers would join or utilize their local clubs for use of their grounds to support picnic trials and the club's activities. Unfor-

tunately, with the gradual changes in testing, and the use of grounds to a greater degree, there has been a new influx of money into the field trial game. It has become necessary for some trainers to invest in their own training grounds, and this has generated more complexity in our sport. Some of these new training grounds are so big and multifaceted, with all the elements of difficulty a dog could experience, many trainers have resorted to falling back to hunting tests.

Today it appears that "Image" is all that counts. One might conclude that those who "have" will gain, and those "without" will keep trying without success. Most of those who keep trying are the backbone of our clubs; they are the workers who are dedicated to support this sport without much, if any, success. They are the ones who continue paying the entry fees and continue working at the trials and judging. Through the years it has been calculated that only 10 percent of the entries will finish or place all the time and only 5 percent of those will place all the time. There are others who are satisfied to just be there to enjoy their dogs and the socialization with other competitors.

Not only is our sport going through a change, but our country has also been going through a big change. For some thirty to forty years, we have seen growth of the psychological influence of the increase in

electronic automation. This seems to have contributed to the development of individuality, or the "me, me" type personality. The desire for more toys, gadgets, etc., has influenced most of our personalities. Could it be that our dogs become one of those toys that provide self-rewards or fill our image needs? What impact does this have on those hard-working people who do not share the same values, but who only want a fair shake for their efforts?

Changes in our sport were certain to affect field trial judging. Some of these changes may have influenced the outcomes of these trials. Positive possibilities have been cited in an excellent article in the Field Trial News, which highlights the importance of the field trial committees' responsibility. One responsibility is to be pro-active in ensuring the judges they nominate will exercise fairness before and during a trial. Otherwise a committee might select a judge who has a more self-centered, essentially negative philosophy. This is the judge who calls back only those dogs whose performances meet some arbitrary mental image or standard, one which the judge believes he or she has established and can maintain--not only over a series, but over an entire stake, as well as among trials. This type of judge will design his or her tests to eliminate dogs or at least reduce them down to some arbitrary figure.



Illustration by Tina Styan

On the other hand, the judge with a more positive philosophy supports features or attributes which he or she believes distinguishes a particular retriever and/or the retriever's performance from "the pack" on that day. Some positive qualities the judge looks for include: eagerness, enthusiasm, keenness, concentration on marking, directness in going to a well-scrutinized fall or accuracy in marking, self-confidence and perseverance in the search, hustle and pace regardless of difficulty of cover, use of wind, willingness to take directions from his handler, retrieving quickly and briskly with a good carry, delivering tenderly to hand.

In conclusion and in response to some of the negative effects on the sport that change(s) have brought about, one place we can begin is to charge field trial committees to exercise their responsibilities. A place to start is to insure that judging is fair to both dogs and handlers. ■

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Ken Thorson has written two books for the sport of field trials: "Competitive Retriever Training – My Reference Notes On Rex's Preliminary Force Program and Basics" and "Judging Field Trials – Preparation and Mechanics." He is in the process of writing a book on "Transition and All-Age Training." Ken resides with his wife, Sandi, in Bloomington, California and can be reached by email at kthor1@juno.com.