

A close-up, profile view of a white dog's face, likely a Golden Retriever, looking towards the right. The dog's fur is soft and white, with some darker spots on its muzzle. The background is a blurred green field.

The **Field Trial Committee**

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

Safety Responsibility Authority Fairness

“
... on behalf of those
wonderful creatures ...
our retrievers, which perform the
difficult skills required at Field Trials ...
”

Introduction

The general intention of a licensed AKC Field Trial for retrievers is the coming together of a group of people whose shared interest lay in a competition among their various retriever breeds to learn on any given occasion, whose retriever(s) is/are the best at retrieving fallen game birds. Their aims include quality breeding, qualification for AKC titles, National lists and competitions.

The American Kennel Club (AKC) requires that any club granted a license for a retriever Field Trial MUST appoint a Field Trial Committee (FTC) and provides that the Committee will have complete responsibility for the planning and conducting of the trial. The AKC emphasizes that the FTC and Field Trial Secretary shall be held responsible for compliance with ALL OF THE FIELD TRIAL RULES AND PROCEDURES except those coming under the sole jurisdiction of the Judges. The Judges' tests must conform to the Rules and the FTC is responsible for insuring that tests do exactly that. When there is a question about a test, or when a formal complaint about any test has been received by the Field Trial Committee, it must determine whether any challenged test is within the Rules.

The FTC has many major roles to fulfill in its duties pertaining to (AKC) licensed and member Field Trials. The principle responsibilities of the FTC during Field Trials will be presented. Some examples of the responsibilities and of issues which occur at Field Trials and in which the FTC should become involved and/or take action will be discussed. The authority for the suggested FTC actions was the Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers.¹

The Retriever Field Trial Rule Book and the Standing Recommendations (Rules) require that FTCs and the Judges insure that certain practices at Field Trials are followed insofar as possible and with some latitude in interpretation. But, it is clear that the concept of fairness is paramount in the Rule book. The Rules were established and continue to be carefully reviewed on an ongoing basis to provide for fairness in the

competitive endeavor that is Retriever Field Trials. It is the responsibility and duty of the FTC to provide oversight so that the patrons of Field Trials will know that the Rules are in effect at their Field Trial. When, for example, the Judges have provided a test that is clearly in violation of a Rule or Rules, it is then that the FTC must act. Unfair conditions and/or a violation of the Rules for any single dog or handler must be avoided. When notified by the FTC of a Rules breach, the Judges should correct the situation and see that dogs already tested under unfair conditions be retried on any replacement test.

Responsibilities of the FTC

APPOINTMENT OF FIELD TRIAL SECRETARY, APPOINTMENT, RESPONSIBILITIES AND AUTHORITIES OF FIELD TRIAL COMMITTEE.

A club that has been granted permission by the AKC to hold a licensed or member Field Trial must appoint an FTC which will have complete responsibility for the planning and conducting of the trial. This committee shall be comprised by at least five members of the club and may include the Field Trial Secretary.

Appointment of anyone to the FTC requires prior consent of the appointee. In some instances, this has not occurred. Each of the FTC members is required to have a copy of the latest AKC Rules and also to be conversant with them.

Committee members and the Field Trial Secretary cannot judge at their trial. This Rule has been abridged too often. Any number of Field Trials have had Judges who were listed as members of the sponsoring club's FTC. In such instances, should a hearing or FTC meeting be required during the trial, Judges listed as members of the FTC must disqualify themselves from the FTC proceedings.

Safety should always be a major concern of the FTC. Inclement weather, especially the threat of lightning, should cause the FTC to suspend Field Trial activity until the threat has passed. The Judges, workers

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in the field, club patrons and their dogs should not be subjected to electrical storms or other extreme weather conditions which might become a threat to them. When the Field Trial activities should cease and restart shall be the sole prerogative of the FTC in consultation with the Judges.

It is worth reviewing again the section of the Rules which states that: The FTC and the Field Trial Secretary shall be held responsible for compliance with all of the Field Trial Rules and Procedures except those coming under the sole jurisdiction of the Judges. The Judges have responsibility for the creation of tests, the evaluation of dog work, the issuing of callbacks for further testing, and decisions concerning the final placements and awards.

Tests may require the dogs to jump a ditch, trench, or deep and wide ravine. If the obstacle is too wide to clear, dogs can become injured. Some have suffered muscle tears, broken bones, and even death by attempting such jumps. When the chest of a dog slams into the far side of an embankment, heart failure can ensue leading to death. The FTC should be alert to any safety issues of this kind or any other dangerous type of test and consult with the Judges so that such tests can be altered for the safety of the retrievers.

The failure of the FTC to act in a situation where a test violates a Rule could lead to suspension by the AKC of that club's license to hold a Field Trial because it failed in its responsibility to insure compliance with all of the Field Trial Rules and Procedures.

When any Field Trial faction, Judge, handler, owner, spectator, club member or worker is not bound by the guiding principles, the entire enterprise is weakened and subject to failure. The interest of the dog owners, handlers, and club members wanes. An example which has occurred at Field Trials is: The Judges set a test which is in violation of the Rules. The FTC is reluctant to approach the Judges for any number of reasons including but not limited to: (1) the FTC members fear the result of their action will cause difficulty in obtaining Judges in the future; members of the FTC may think that such action will diminish their future invitations to judge for other clubs; and, the worry that the Judges may resign and refuse to continue judging.

These reasons and others for no action from the FTC when it is needed, are matters related to personal interest and not to the bond which

unites all Field Trial members seeking fair competition guided by the Rules. It is for the good of the Principles and aims of Field Trials that violations of Rules should be addressed by the FTC.

On rare occasions, situations develop when Judges disagree with one another and cannot come to a comprised position. Most Judges cooperate with the FTC. Judges who set a test which is not in compliance with the Rules and then refuse to work with the FTC or its designee to remedy the situation, should be replaced. Judges have insisted upon turning in their books and retiring over disagreements and prior to the end of their assigned duties. Every attempt should be made by the FTC to dissuade any Judge from resigning. If a Judge insists upon resigning, then the FTC should accept the Judge's book and provide a comprehensive report of the incident to the AKC.

The AKC publication, Dealing With Misconduct, Offenses, IV, Violation of AKC Rules and Regulations or Club Regulations, Section C. Judging Improprieties has as penalties for Judges or any person connected with Field Trials found guilty of impropriety including suspension from 1 year to life depending upon the seriousness of the breach. There are also monetary fines from \$500 to \$1,000. While such incidents are very rare, when they arise, the FTC should not shirk from its responsibility to investigate thoroughly and report its findings to the AKC.

The Rule with respect to blind retrieves states that the dog should be in sight continuously which means at all times. If the Judges set a blind retrieve test in which the retrievers are out of sight for only a few seconds (2-3 seconds) when near to the imaginary line to the end of the blind, such tests have been deemed acceptable due to long standing common practice. If, however, the Judges have set a blind retrieve test in which dogs are out of sight for more than a few seconds, the test is a violation of this Rule. In such instances, the FTC should consult with the Judges and urge them to develop a blind test that is in compliance with the Rule. Too often, dogs that are out of sight of the handler and Judges for more than a few seconds are not recalled for further testing. Handlers must have an opportunity to handle their dogs quickly onto a reasonable line to the blind before the dogs get lost. They cannot do this when the blind retrieve requires the dog to be out of sight for an extended period of time.

Chapter 14 in the Rules requires that in stakes carrying championship points, the Judges shall impose a system of rotation and publicly announce it. The common practice is to provide the start number and

the NO-NO drill for judges ...

The following utterances made by some Judges at Field Trials should make the FTC shudder.

- "You can see the dog if it is on line." Huh? Well, what if the dog does not line the blind? Isn't this why we teach them to handle?
- "It will get better when the sun moves and the shadows change." Let's just wait a while for the sun to rise and the fog to lift before starting.
- "I can hear the whistle." Well, you are not a dog 400 yards from the line!
- "The line to the blind is the line to the blind." Oh? What about that narrow channel out there with an island on one side and a point on the other? The line is close to both. What are the instructions?
- "We think that the line is obvious." Hmmm; it is not so obvious to the handlers.
- "I never call 'no birds' on fliers." Come on. Some fliers go far out of the area of the fall creating unfairness. Others go behind guns or very close to them. In such instances and too often the working dogs get locked into the scent in the area of the fall and never recover to fliers well out of the area of the fall. Then, they are eliminated due to a poor judging decision.
- "I don't use white tape on birds." Well, why not if it improves the thrown bird's visibility for the dogs?
- "We won't use decoys on water tests." You should. This is a Rules requirement.

rotation numbers vocally prior to the running of the first dog. Then, the rotation information shall be posted in the holding blind for all handlers to see.

The dogs shall be run in order of the draw. This requirement is often abused and leads to consternation among handlers at Field Trials. Departures from the order of the draw and running order may occur when it is the opinion of the Judges or the FTC that they result in a reasonable or desirable saving of time in the conduct of the trial, provided, however, that whenever decisions regarding a change in the running order will effect two or more stakes, the Field Trial Marshal may overrule the Judges and/or the stake marshal and make the final decision as to such changes in the running order.

The draw becomes a farce when the stake marshals of All-Age stakes and Field Trial Marshal do not enforce it. An all too common problem at Field Trials is that handlers refuse to leave the Open stake in reasonable time to run in order at the Amateur stake or to run in a minor stake. This issue causes deep consternation among handlers and is an issue that should not be a problem. Modern communication systems and the Rules themselves, as stated herein, provide for adequate response to this issue. It is simply a matter of the FTC, stake marshals and Judges cooperating and enforcing the Rules about running in order. They should provide warnings and even penalties for those who shirk their responsibility to be available to run a test in the order of the draw and rotation or as directed.

The draw for running order has nothing to do with changing weather and light conditions. But the Judges do and should, insofar as reasonably possible, present relatively similar tests to all dogs. This is the Rule of Equity. Gun positions cannot be changed once a series is underway because of changing conditions. The Judges should consider from the start the changing conditions and attempt to set their tests to alleviate changing conditions as best they can. A little wait for betting lighting is better than sacrificing a few early dogs at the start to poor visibility.

The Standard Procedures For Non-slip Retriever Trials, under Trial Procedures, No. 3. indicates that the Judges with due regard to the recommendations of the FTC, shall determine the tests to be given in each series. Special consideration should be given to factors which influence the fairness of marking tests. A list of those factors includes: the placement of gun stations which are conspicuous and can be found by the dogs; the dead bird throws and live bird flayers must be visible to the

dogs for they cannot mark what is not seen. Bad backgrounds and extreme distances contribute to a lack of visibility. These issues are critical ones when setting a marking test since marking is of primary importance. The fact that marking is of primary importance is stated no less than five times in the Rules.

Holding blinds for retiring guns must be sufficiently covered so that they do not stick out as obvious targets and enticements for the dogs. The holding blinds must be placed to avoid more than just a few steps to be taken by the throwers when they retire. The holding blinds should be placed on the down wind side of the throw and holding blind.

Dogs must clearly see the handler during blind retrieve tests. If possible, the sun should not be directly behind the handler. The dogs must be able to hear whistles all the way out to the planted bird. Posted instructions for blind retrieves should state clearly what the expectations for the blind retrieve are. Lack of instructions cause handlers to speculate about the requirements of the blind retrieve. This is not good judging technique. Handlers want to know what is not so obvious about the blind test but will be considered in the judging of it.

While the Judges are solely responsible for the nature and content of the tests in the stake they are judging, it is the duty of Judges to inquire of the FTC about special conditions, ... and to cooperate with the Field Trial Committee in conducting tests that will not unduly delay or hinder the timely completion of the trial or any stake therein.

When sufficient time remains, Derby stakes should complete four series: two land series and two water series. Retrievers are water dogs. Ending a Derby stake after three series or less, or one water series, when there is time for another water series does not comply with Rule No. 16 which stipulates as follows: *"Retrievers should perform equally well on the land and in the water, and shall be thoroughly tested on both."* The FTC, in circumstances where the Derby Judges stop after three series with sufficient time and assistance for another series, should encourage the Judges to complete two land and two water series which is standard practice and which practice conforms with this Rule. It is not unusual for the 2nd water series in the Derby stake to change the order of final placements. It is unfair to handlers playing "catch-up" to end the Derby after less than thorough and equal testing on land and in water.

The Supplement To The Standard Procedure, Section 1. para. 2, states that dogs are expected to retrieve any type of game bird under all conditions, and the Judges AND the Field Trial Committee have complete

- "We are going to skip the honoring requirement." No you are not! It is also a Rules requirement in All-Age stakes.
- "There won't be a water blind because of time restrictions." Good judges know about time management from the start and allow enough time for a tough water blind series.
- "There was confusion on a "no go" or a "recast." Uh, what was the confusion? It may have been a soft send, or a loud noise somewhere. But, it also may have been something in the dog not related to confusion which requires elimination. Be careful on this one. When unclear about causes, make a decision in favor of the dog.
- "I release by saying 'dog.'" The Rules indicate clearly in two places that the dog's number is to be called. Put your finger in your book on the dog's page so that should you forget the number, you can quickly look at the book and see it. This is a very good habit to develop. There have been retrievers with the registered name, "Dawg," and have been sent by that

- name. The Judge calling 'dog' as a release, could have the dog leave the line prior to the handler's wishes. Do it right!
- "Dogs must be sent from the mat/line for all retrieves." Okay, but then do not call the number for a dog that has crept forward of the mat/line because the Rules clearly state that once the dog's number has been called, it is free to run in and retrieve irrespective of its position. Ask the handler to heel the dog to the mat/line and then call the number.
- "One cast refusal is enough for elimination." No it isn't. The Rules state that one cast refusal is a minor fault. Retrievers have won stakes with more than one minor fault.
- "A 'pop' eliminates a dog from winning." A single pop is also a minor fault and the reason for this is it is not known whether the dog heard something thought to have been a whistle command; or whether a whistle from another nearby stake was heard. Repeated 'pops' are a different problem. Dogs with a single pop have won stakes.

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control over the mechanics and requirements of each trial. It is imperative that the FTC plan effectively for its licensed Field Trials. Special attention should be given to the purchase of birds, the recruiting of an adequate number of personnel to work at the trial, and to providing all equipment necessary for the Judges to conduct land and water tests in a timely manner. The Field Trial Chair or Field Trial Marshal should receive authority from the FTC to form committees or to act independently, as necessary, to insure the success of the Field Trial.

In the Rules, Part I – TRIAL PROCEDURE, the requirements concerning the apportioning of time to the Various Stakes is mentioned. This is an early and most important consideration in planning the mechanics of a trial and is the joint responsibility of the Judges and the FTC.

Inspection of Field Trial Grounds. Where and when tests are to be conducted is the prerogative of the FTC. The decisions about site selection are done in consultation with the Judges as a courtesy. The inspections are important because of the relation to the safety of the dogs and workers. The Judges inspect the Field Trial grounds with representatives of the FTC in advance of the scheduled hour for the trial to start and they seek their counsel regarding peculiarities of the grounds not readily apparent. Such factors as broad ditches, unsafe water, hornets nests, fire ants, holes in the ground, glass, stumps, hidden boulders, high and thick weeds and nettles, unseen roads, and the like, are issues that should cause the FTC and Judges to remedy these situations or seek a safer place to conduct a test. The failure to carefully inspect the sites for tests is a serious oversight and has led to injuries and deaths of dogs. It is well known that high weeds and heavy cover when combined with elevated ambient temperatures lead to dogs suffering heat prostration and even death. Such tests should be avoided.

Conclusion

Members of FTCs, when accepting assignments, consent to representing the AKC and to oversight responsibilities which clearly include seeing that the tests are within the Rules. They should operate without bias, unwise interpretations, unscrupulous interference with Judges, or personal favoritism. The FTC and the Judges are a team. The team

should work together rather than antagonistically. Any issues should be resolved amicably and without duress. The correct spirit is to provide for a coordinated effort and good management in the interest of owners, handlers, and their dogs. This is the idea of equity that is intended by the Rules.

A major component of Field Trials is that a good percentage of the owners and handlers are also approved Judges. Many others who are not Judges know and understand the Rules. When a test developed by Judges at a Field Trial is in conflict with the Rules, it is noticed quickly by the gallery full of handlers and becomes a matter of discussion. If in fact, the test breaches a Rule, then the FTC should review the matter with the Judges and seek a remedy.

No set of Judges desires to have a zealous FTC looking over their shoulders when they are performing their assignments. When however, there has been a breach of the Rules in a test, it is in the interest of owners, handlers, and of Field Trials for the FTC and Judges to correct the situation. Failure to respond only leaves a sense of futility in the minds of Field Trial patrons and diminishes their spirit and also the enterprise. The work of the FTC will enhance the good will and camaraderie that exists among Field Trial participants and these are values worth preserving.

Perfection is not the goal at Field Trials as no one expects every Judge to see the shortcomings of a test. That is why safeguards exist in the Rules which permit a fair competition. It is important to remember that few complaints heard about tests are valid. Nearly every weekend throughout the year, a number of Field Trials for retriever breeds are completed successfully without a 'hitch' of any sort. These successes indicate the splendid general welfare of Field Trials.

There is no doubt that training for Field Trials has and continues to improve the retriever breeds. FTCs, Judges and handlers are to be applauded for their efforts on behalf of those wonderful creatures ... our retrievers, which perform the difficult skills required at Field Trials.

1 Field Trial RULES and STANDARD PROCEDURES: including Standing Recommendations of the Retriever Advisory Committee and the Supplement to the Standard Procedure. Amended to June 2013, Published by the American Kennel Club.

Note: Rules are established guides for conduct and procedures. Regulations control and direct conduct in accord with the rules. ■

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