

# The Route

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

THE QUESTION IS THIS: should Judges evaluate lines to marks? The answer is yes (with qualifications) and no (with explanations). Can one imagine Judges making decisions about the best marks based upon straight lines to them? Well, no; or, they shouldn't do that. When the *Rules* were written, it was understood that the path to a mark could not always be described as a straight line. Here is why.

Judges seek testing sites with character. Character, in this respect, suggests that bird placement, or marks, can be set where it is impossible, or nearly so, for a retriever to run straight to the fall. Large and impassable mounds of dirt with steep unclimbable sides, clumps of trees tightly packed together, huge boulders, steep hillsides and valleys where the dogs lose sight of the gun station, ravines, large logs, buildings, creeks, and the like all can cause dogs to alter their path to the fall. This is done by Judges to learn whether dogs thrown off the path to the bird can correct their route to it once they are beyond the hazard(s). If they are able to correct their paths, they are displaying memory of the fall. This is what Judges desire to see. Dogs will run around ponds, avoid rough going terrain, seek a shorter path, take too long to enter water and skirt cover on their way to a mark. These mannerisms will not get a dog a win when we are judging. Dogs avoiding hazards are often displaying either a lack of courage or training or both. In All-Age stakes, Judges are to judge perseverance, intelligence and courage. Judges need to be aware of these traits as they are the natural attributes, mentioned in the *Rules*, which the dogs need to overcome the obstacles set between them and the mark. The better dogs are the ones who take all the hazards and go on a direct path to the bird.

In the minor stakes, Derby and Qualifying, intermediate training is underway as well as some All-Age training. Judges should not expect the routes taken by dogs in these stakes to be as well performed as they are by an All-Age dog. The severity of penalties, if any, should be somewhat relaxed. In these stakes, Judges should strive to set up tests that are mainly aimed at testing the natural abilities of the dogs. Then, it is not as necessary for the Judges to look for the finer degrees of training which permit the dogs to overcome difficult routes to the fall. Sharp angles into water are an example. When setting up a Derby water test, attempt to locate good marks which have entries straight into the water if possible. Taking angles into water is an acquired ability learned in training and not required in Derby stakes. Another example might be that when a young dog is running out of sight of the gun station for a long period of time and finds itself off the correct route to the fall and then corrects itself, there should be no penalty. The *Rules* pertaining to Derby dogs and their acquired abilities learned via training mention only: some steadiness and obedience, not “switching,” and delivery to hand. That

is all. Derby stakes are about natural abilities. We understand that great progress in the training of young dogs has occurred since the rules were written. Nevertheless, Judges should try more diligently to set tests in minor stakes that mainly require them to judge natural abilities. An improvement in this area of field trials would go far in eliminating some of the devastating tests which wipe out most of the entries during the first series and which we hear about all too often these days. Too many Qualifying stakes are more difficult and require more training than the Amateur stake. This simply is not the correct way to judge that stake. Field Trial Committees should be more involved in what occurs at their trials and be unafraid to make suggestions to keep tests in minor stakes within the reasonable bounds suggested by the *Rules*.

The words used in the *Rules*<sup>2</sup> about the route were ... “go directly,” “without unduly disturbing too much ground,” and, “without disturbing too much cover.” **Directly** means ... at once, immediately and without delay. It does NOT mean straight. **Unduly** means without excessively or immoderately going out of the way en route to a mark. Also, with no side trips or hunts along the way. **Ground** is good old mother earth; **Cover**, for our purposes, is what grows upon the ground. The statement in the *Rules* ... “Disturbing too much ground” ... provides some leeway for not going straight along the best route to a fall but suggests that the route should be an expeditious one. A key here for Judges is to observe when a dog puts its nose to the ground for that move signifies a “hunt.” These words indicate that rule makers knew from experience and common sense that straight lines are seldom possible when a dog is sent for a mark. That is why the word ... straight ... was not part of the vernacular when discussing how to judge a dog seeking a fall. The words which were put into the *Rules* clearly indicate what the intent was. Get the bird in the best manner and by the best route which is possible and do not avoid rough going, hazards, water, and the like.

Let's get straight about something. (Sorry; just a play on the word “straight.”) When the words ... “line,” or “lining,” or “lines” enter our minds, the mental picture is of a straight line as when judging a blind retrieve where straight lines are the model of perfection. This is not a good reference for thinking about the path to marks. The word ... route ... better exemplifies what should be judged when watching a retriever go for a mark. Why? Well, routes are seldom straight although they can be. A “route” is a way of travel from one place to another. There are twists and turns just as when one must go to the corner store. One need not, when judging marks, begin drawing straight lines from the starting point to the bird and then evaluate digressions from it. Questions for marks are: what *route* did the dog take when sent; and, what happened along the way? This makes much better sense than asking, ... ‘did the dog take a straight



# Not Taken<sup>1</sup>



Photo by Mark Atwater



## The Route Not Taken

line to the mark? It is more than just a play on words; words affect how we think about things. The *Rules* have anticipated this distinction when discussing marks and without mentioning the word ... straight.

How do we think about things like the *route* to a mark? There are questions for Judges like: how to record the route; what about faults committed along the route; the scoring of a dog that disturbs too much ground; penalties for avoiding water on the route; the effects of wind and weather on the route; how a dog which holds a better route out-scores other dogs, especially when water or rough going is involved; and, noting where a dog begins to hunt. Was the hunt near to the fall or elsewhere is one question. Also, how long did it take a dog hunting elsewhere to hunt near to where the bird fell and should it have been handled there quickly and was not?

Before we get the dog en route very far towards a fall, there are faults that cause elimination quickly while a dog is yet on or near to the starting point and under judgment. They include failing events like: breaking, interfering with an honoring dog, loud barking, severe unsteadiness, complete lack of obedience, handler touching the dog, handler giving verbal commands after signaling for the birds and before the number has been called, unsportsmanlike conduct (eliminates the handler), dog walks instead of runs (lack of style), bolting elsewhere, dog growls at or bites a Judge or its handler, or, failure to leave the line on command. (Growling or biting, must be reported to The Field Trial Committee by the Judges. A report is required.) Good bye; the Judges have shut their books.

Judges normally draw the major obstacles onto each page in their books. Then they can easily note how the dogs react to them. How a dog goes around an object is unimportant so long as it recovers to a path which leads to the fall. When they correct their path to the fall, they display memory of where the bird fell. If the decision causes the dog to go elsewhere than directly to the mark, this will be noted on its page. Water between the line and the fall is another story, especially for All-Age dogs. Going around, or not entering the water is a serious fault. However, if the water is merely a small hole, say less than a few feet wide, a dog may not see it as necessary to enter and should not be penalized for missing it. This is because the route is likely unaffected when only a few feet are involved. It is worth repeating here that there is no scale of deductions in scoring for any of the faults mentioned. The Judges will determine the penalty, if any, and its severity when discussing the work of each dog. (*Rules*, p. 49.) This is a fundamental part of judging. But, it is vitally important that all faults be noted for each dog.

Where a hunt begins, its continuation and the length of time needed to find the bird are all part of the diagrams and notes which Judges draw for each dog. When a dog goes directly to the fall area, most Judges simply draw a short simulation of the hunt and then score it. The diagram may be as little as an arrow on the bird which indicates a pinpointed mark. The route taken may not even be drawn because it was direct, efficient, and without any faults. Good Judges develop personal systems for identifying these situations. Their diagrams and notes should permit them to quickly remember what each dog did on the mark. With excellent bird placement, the route becomes much more important to the test and creates increased difficulty for the dogs. When the route is difficult and a dog reaches the fall quickly and efficiently and thereby also indicates an excellent mark, some Judges make special notations to remind them of the superior effort. Going elsewhere except directly to the fall is excessive hunting and unwarranted and receives a lower score. In severe cases, elimination is the penalty.

Judges should follow the rule about dogs 'not going directly to the

fall.' Too many times, when a dog goes elsewhere, hunts for an interminable amount of time, and finally stumbles onto the bird, the dog is called back for another series. This is wrong. The dog failed the mark and the test and should be eliminated. It did not go directly to the area of the fall as per the rules. On the other hand, when a handler sees that a dog is not going to the fall area and quickly handles the dog to it, the dog may be recalled for another series. (*Rules*, p. 51.) Handlers seldom will blow the whistle and quickly handle because they know that recall for the next series goes out the window with most all Judges when they handle the dog on a mark. What Judges need to do is severely penalize the team for NOT handling quickly when the dog hunts the neighborhood but not the fall area. Don't call them back for another series. And also, too many Judges do not recall a quick handle on a mark that is done according to the *Rules* (p. 51). It is these shortcomings in judging that have taught handlers not to handle when they should on a mark. This is a serious issue and one that definitely needs correcting by Judges.

With respect to cover, the Judges should place a mark so that a dog cheating the cover along the way will tend to be directed along a path away from the fall. It is a terrible mark that has a dog which takes the cover put onto a path away from the fall. Judges should note both when dogs either enter or skirt the cover. A dog that enters cover on the path to the fall should outscore one that skirts the cover even if both go quickly to the bird.

One can only imagine how long it would take handlers to line up a dog for a mark if judging straight lines to them was of paramount importance. There is the rule which penalizes conspicuously intensive lining efforts by a handler. Remember, that when a handler takes excessive time to line up a dog, the dog is not responding well, if at all to commands. This is disobedience and a serious fault as is excessive lining. (*Rules*, pp. 34-5.) Judges do well to warn handlers when they are being penalized for excessive lining on a mark or a blind retrieve.

When changes in weather during a test affect lines to marks, the changes are simply the luck of the draw for the dogs and there is little Judges can do except to note them when they occur. Wind direction changes which may assist dogs in their efforts to retrieve a fall should also be noted. Inclement weather which hampers the retrieve, such as strong rain downpours, should also be noted for a dog's vision can be affected. Then, there is the matter of cold temperatures and water. Cold water can cause dogs to refuse water entries. On a mark, a dog entering water, especially cold water, en route to a mark, should receive a top score if the bird is then found quickly. And, dogs refusing to enter water on the route to the bird should be severely penalized.

Finally, if a dog en route to a mark shows interest in other things, meanders, or displays little style, thereby slowing or stopping the hunt, and the route to the fall is not swiftly taken, the dog should be eliminated. Judges want to see dogs that go directly to the fall area with dispatch and on the first cast from the handler. This scenario is almost never a straight line. The well trained dogs are the ones that are able to manage the terrain denoting excellent acquired abilities and then find the bird quickly when arriving in the fall area which indicates strong marking or natural ability. Give a top score to them! One of them may eventually become your winner. ■

<sup>1</sup>The title is reminiscent of Robert Frost's poem, "The Road Not Taken." As in Frost's poem about decisions in life, the "route" a retriever takes to a mark is not redeemable.

<sup>2</sup>Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers: Including Standing Recommendations of the Retriever Advisory Committee and the Supplement to the Standard Procedure. Amended to October 2015. Published by The American Kennel Club. (Hereinafter, *Rules*.)