

What?

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

Introduction

Examples of field trial testing issues actually witnessed or undergone are mentioned. In contrast to 'bad' tests, some examples of good judging and handler involvement are presented. The rules applicable to the situations are provided.

Safety First: The Field Trial Committee

The judges set the line for a land marking test on an abandoned railroad right of way and raised embankment. The dogs were to run down the slope fronting them, through some tall weeds, and out into a field where the marks were to be thrown. Prior to the running of a test dog, handlers went down into the weeds at the bottom of the embankment to check for safety. This was a responsibility of the judges which they had not done. The handlers found a rusty farm disc implement hidden in the weeds and on the line into the field. **WHAT?**

The handlers asked the judges to move to another location as the disc was not mobile and was a safety hazard. The judges demurred deciding to go forward with the test by moving the line a few feet. **WHAT?** The test dog handler in the holding blind declined to run the test. A group of assembled handlers indicated that if the test site was not changed, they were going to "scratch." The judges then decided to move the test to a another location.

This was a bad start to test setup with a major slip up and excellent handler involvement to rectify a dangerous situation. Where was the field trial committee on this one?

It is very important that Judges inspect the field trial grounds with representatives of the Field Trial Committee in advance of the

scheduled hour for the trial to start, and seek their counsel regarding any peculiarities of the grounds not readily apparent. [Rules, p. 43.]

Signaling for the Birds

In an Open All-Age land series setup, the first dog to run the test approached the line and the signaling judge took a position directly to the left of the handler and dog. He had a long white bath towel to signal for the throws. He waved the towel for each throw and it unfurled well out in front of the dog and distracted it on every mark. **WHAT?** The dog saw none of the birds thrown turning its head each time to see the waving towel. The judge, sitting in a chair on the other side of the handler, called the dog's number. **WHAT?** This was peculiar. The handler peered at the judge in the chair in disbelief. He sent the dog for the flier. A very long hunt ensued without success. The judge in the chair said: "When are you going to pick up your dog?" The handler responded: "the dog was distracted on every throw which is interference? I deserve a rerun." The judges were silent. Finally, the dog found a bird and delivered it and the handler was excused. No rerun was given. **WHAT?** The handler left the line and a professional handler in the holding blind said to him as he passed by ... "you got screwed!"

The signaling Judge should be careful that neither his signaling nor the shadow of it distracts either dog. [Rules, p. 45.]

This sort of behavior by judges is unconscionable. Judges should stand well back on a 45 degree angle away from the handler and dog casting no shadows toward them when signaling. If this kind of action should happen to a handler, heel the dog off line immediately. There will be questions and discussion and the handler normally receives a rerun.

Conspicuous and Obvious Guns

Imagine this land test observed at an Amateur stake. The flier was shot behind thick weed cover ten feet tall. The gun team and bird thrower were not fully visible from the line. The dog could only see the bird when it was launched into the air and shot behind the cover, that is, if the dog was looking in the right direction and not still searching for the gun position. **WHAT?** The handlers sent their dogs through the cover but could not see it recover the bird nor could the judges. **WHAT?** Were they judging the quality of the retrieve by the time it took to reappear with the bird? Was the flier simply a pass/fail bird?

This test was so poor that dogs could be sent for another mark more than 300 yards left of the flier, disappear into a large pit where the bird was thrown and wind up back in the flier area without anyone seeing the dog go there. **WHAT?** Yes, this did happen. When everyone, including the Judges, wondered where the dog happened to be, the flier guns radioed the judges to tell them that the dog had returned to hunt the live flier area. This test had two areas of the fall not visible to the handlers or judges. **WHAT?** What kind of a crap shoot was this? No one can judge what cannot be seen?

... location of the Guns is important ... [Rules, p. 43]

... the guns shall be so stationed as to be conspicuous to and easily identified by the dog. [Rules, p. 30.]

Tricky Tests

The placement of a key mark from a retired gun station during the final water marking series of an Amateur stake was set on the same line as the line to the water blind which had just been completed? **WHAT?**

Dogs plowed right on past this retired water mark and continued deeper to where the blind had been planted. This was a tricky setup. Does this type of bird placement really test marking ability? The answer is NO! There are much better methods for testing water marks. Do not put a water mark on the same line that was used for a water blind.

With good tests, it is much easier to judge the quality of the performances by various dogs than could be true with tests which are so simple and so easy that most of the dogs turn in almost perfect performances, or with tests which are too difficult and time-consuming, or too "tricky," hence, apparently designed to produce many failures or eliminations. [Rules, p. 43.] (Emphasis supplied.)

Judges should try for good tests.

Vision of the Area of the Fall

The judges in an Amateur All-Age stake had a key mark thrown where the entire area of the fall during a land test was behind a hill and not visible from the line. **WHAT?** How can the Judges observe and score what cannot be seen in the most critical part of the retrieve, the area of the fall? This is NOT an appropriate method for increasing the difficulty of a test. Are these kinds of marks due to gross ignorance and incompetence? Or, are they an intentional method of supposedly increasing the difficulty of the mark. (See the rule mentioned above.) It is one thing to see the bird in the air as it falls; it is another to have it fall where the judges cannot see the dog's work.

The rules require judges to note faults committed in the area of the fall. They cannot judge a dog which is not visible except to state that it was out of sight in a key area



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which the judges produced. **WHAT?** While the discussion of the area of the fall in the rules does not specify visibility of that area, it is only logical and common sense that judges must be able to see dogs in the area of the fall. (Rules, pp. 50-51.)

Blind Retrieves

A dog was sent on a water blind over points which were raised high out of the water. The dog was out of sight behind a point for a minimum of 8 seconds and more. **WHAT?** When it came into view, it was well off line and exiting the water. The judges ordered the dog picked up. **WHAT?** The handler exploded with expletives while saying that the blind was not fair due to the length of time the dog was out of sight giving no opportunity to correct its line.

While the handler was correct in his belief that the blind violated the rules, his profane outburst left no choice for the judges. He was written up. This problem about dogs out of sight for extended times on blinds has been addressed in this journal in the past.¹ The rules for blind retrieves states:

... the test should be so planned that the dog should be "in-sight" continuously. [Rules, p. 44.]

"In sight continuously" means all the time. However, it has become an accepted convention that a dog can be out of sight on a blind retrieve for "a few moments." **Three to five seconds is the conventional norm recognized as the definition of "a few moments." This short interval provides an opportunity to handle a dog when it appears off line.** Blinds that put dogs out of sight longer than this norm are a violation of the rules for blind retrieves.

If the rule for blinds had been followed, this situation would never have occurred. Where was the field trial committee when this blind was set?

The Shape of Holding Blinds Concealed

In another Amateur stake, the judges did not camouflage holding blinds used in the field. **WHAT?** Raw holding blinds in the field are strong factors which entice dogs away from lines to marks. The bare holding blind can eliminate dogs by causing long hunts out of the area of the fall. Handlers should report this kind of disrespect of the rules to the field trial committee.

Retired Guns and throwers should be concealed by a blind that provides complete coverage, adequate space, and natural camouflage to conceal the distinctive shape of the blind ... [Rules, p. 30.]

Loud and Noisy Handler

A handler brought his dog to the line with loud "heel" commands. The judges warned the handler that this mannerism was earning penalties. After the dog ran the test, the handler questioned the judges who responded that in an ordinary day's shoot with incoming ducks, such boisterous behavior would have flared the ducks. **WHAT?** An "ordinary days shoot" does not have much relevance any longer. However, there are instances in which it does. Loud commands were construed by the judges as threatening gestures. He was not dropped, but was quiet thereafter. Good work judges! Differing opinions exist about loud vocal commands by a handler coming to and on line. When they occur, the demonstration is unattractive and displeasing.

"... 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.]

Equity

The first running dog in an Amateur stake hunted for an extended length of time for the shot flier. The judges asked the handler to pick up the dog. He was told that he would receive a rerun. **WHAT?** The judges had set the test so that the live flier was thrown into the sun. Both judges knew that the dog was an excellent marker and decided that it had not seen the bird due to the position of the sun. They ordered a 45 minute delay in the running of the test. By that time, the sun had risen higher into the sky and was no longer directly behind the shot flier. This was a bad start corrected successfully by the judges. Good work judges!

Judges should always check the position of the sun when setting the flier station. Gunners have learned about shooting into the sun and follow the old shibboleth ... 'when the bird is launched, shoot the sun.'

In a Derby stake, the last dog to run the first series arrived late in the day. Other handlers and the gallery had left. The judges were waiting patiently. When the flier was launched, the gunners missed and the bird flew away. A "no bird" was called and one judge said to the handler ... 'we have had poor shooting from the gun team. Since you are the last dog, take as much time as you need and when you are ready, let us know.' After about five minutes, the handler returned to the line and again the gun team missed the flier. The judges were exasperated. The handler did not wish to wait any longer and asked to run right away. This time, the gun team got a few shot into the duck which flew lazily along about 3 feet above the ground coming ever closer to the line. A "no bird" was not called as those at the line were intently watching the duck. As it got close to the line, the dog ran out a few feet without being sent and snatched the bird out of the air and returned to his handler. **WHAT?** Was this a break? The handler took delivery and the dog recovered the memory bird. Then, he turned to the judges who said: 'wow; we are glad that your dog did that as we might have been here 'til dark. Your dog is on the callback list.' These judges demonstrated good common sense.

If there is an occurrence which makes for a relatively unfair test for a dog, the Judges shall exercise their discretion in determining how to form a judgment of the quality of the work of the dog in the series notwithstanding the unfairness. In forming such judgment the Judges may decide that it is necessary or unnecessary to re-run the dog. [Rules, p. 31.]

Judging All Faults

A dog sent for a mark stopped to urinate on a round bale and then proceeded. Another dog crept forward an estimated 20 yards (**WHAT?**) while the birds were being thrown. The gallery wondered how the judges would score these two dogs. When the callbacks were announced, the judges had not recalled either dog. Perseverance, style, stopping the hunt and unsteadiness likely entered into their decisions. The dogs accumulated penalties sufficient for elimination. A twenty yard creep is NOT creeping; it is a BREAK. Long creeps are an unfair advantage as they put a dog closer to the falls providing it with greater vision of them.

The Judges should agree in advance as to the extent of movement which shall be considered "creeping," short of breaking, and whether working dogs so offending shall be ordered brought to heel before being sent to retrieve. [Rules, p. 46.]

Poor Sportsmanship

A handler in the honor box during a water marking series was loudly complaining about having to honor in the last series because he had several dogs to run and needed more time to air them before rushing to the line. **WHAT?** His manner was disturbing the dog and handler on

line. The signaling judge sent the handler on line back to the holding blind. Then he informed the handler in the honor box that his behavior exhibited poor sportsmanship because it was interfering with the running dog and handler. He was warned that further such displays would cause him to be disqualified. There was no more belly aching from him. **THAT'S THE WAY TO DO IT JUDGES!**

The Judges of a particular stake shall have the authority to expel a handler from any further competition in the stake if they observe unsportsmanlike conduct on the part of the handler ... [Rules, p. 36.]

Handler Line Manners

Judges have not been penalizing movements by handlers after they have signaled for the birds in a marking test and before their numbers have been called. The most obvious violations are: the patting of a leg with a hand; scraping a foot across the mat or ground; hissing, coughing and throat clearing; and, the snapping of fingers. **WHAT?** These attempts to get a dog to look at another throw which the handler believes the dog will miss are violations of a rule. Sometimes the judges have set marks so wide that dogs do not swing their heads to view all of them. Also, it is well known that many dogs will fixate on the flier station and ignore the other throws. The trial wise ones have already planted a picture in their minds about where the other birds are going; they want the live shot flier and only watch for it.

During the period from the moment when the handler signals readiness for the birds to be thrown until the dog's number is called, the handler of the working or honoring dog shall remain silent. Also, in all marking tests during such period, the handler's hands shall remain quietly in close proximity to his body. A handler who projects his hand during such period, whether for the purpose of assisting his dog to locate a fall or otherwise, should be considered to have used a threatening gesture, and his dog penalized accordingly. [Rules, p. 33-4.]

Judges can quibble about the scraping of a foot since it was not mentioned in the rule. It is clear that the intention of the rule was for the handler to be completely inactive and doing nothing to assist the dog during this period of time. It is logical that foot scraping comes under this rule. Violations of this genre by the handler should be noted in the judges' books. The severity of any penalty has been left to the judges. A warning to the handler about these mannerisms after the dog has completed the test is in order. If more judges would give warnings when merited, their work would go far toward stopping this "stuff" because it is being penalized.

Some handlers take interminable lengths of time preparing their dogs prior to signaling for the throws to commence; or, for sending on a blind. This is excessive lining. Judges have been heard informing these handlers that in a few seconds, the signal will be given for the first bird to be thrown in a marking test. Good work judges. Subsequently, handlers should be warned that repeated excessive lining will cause elimination.

After the running dog comes to the line in a test that includes marks, the judges shall allow a reasonable time for the handler of the running dog to identify the locations of the guns and bird boys and to line up the dog. After such time the judges may notify the handler that the birds are about to be called for and thereafter signal for them. When so notified the handler may immediately verbally steady the dog prior to the birds being thrown. [Rules, p. 34.] And,

In marking tests, a dog whose handler gives him a line in the direction of the fall, provided that such lining is accomplished briskly and precisely, should not by reason of such lining be outscored by a dog not so lined. However, conspicuously intensive lining is undesirable and should be penalized. [Rules, p. 35.]

There are good reasons for judges to be patient with handlers? Sometimes the judges place the thrower in a difficult position for the dogs to locate. A lone thrower was out there 300 yards or more in one setup, along a wood line atop a hill, in the shadows, on an overcast day. **WHAT?** Yes, this happened. Judges, take your medicine. You put the thrower there. The dogs will need some time to find that thrower if at all. Too many times, a handler has finally given up trying to get a dog to find a difficult gun placement and has signaled for the birds in exasperation thinking the dog will look there when the gun report is heard. They do this to avoid a penalty for excessive lining. **WHAT?** This should never happen. Put the throwers where they are conspicuously visible ... **PERIOD!**

Judges should know from experience when a handler has taken too much time prior to signaling for the birds or launching the dog on a blind retrieve. Do not hesitate when your role as a judge calls for you to provide equity, insofar as possible, in the running of the dogs. A polite warning that the judge is going to signal for the birds to be thrown allowing a moment for the handler ready the dog is important. Then, call for the birds.

Conclusion

All-Age judges are rightly concerned when setting the first series for a large number of entries containing field champions, a national field champion or two, and other good retrievers. This is especially true in Amateur stakes as two days is the norm for their completion. Some judges are exceptional at setting worthy tests without enlisting ones that bend the rules. There are other judges who are quick to use tests primarily aimed at eliminating as many dogs as possible; some of their tests are too "tricky" or violate the rules.

We are not advocating that handlers challenge tests because they disagree with a setup or decisions by judges. There must be an obvious breach of the rules before a formal complaint concerning any test is made. Challenges are serious business and the use of them should not be abused. When no one will challenge clear violations of the rules, problems will only increase in the future.

The litany of issues herein is but a mere fraction of the stories about poor or illegal tests and handler activity experienced at field trials. There are always difficulties and disagreements in judgmental activities as humans are not perfect. We can all live with honest mistakes made by judges but not with gross negligence or ignorance of the rules.

The various scenarios presented herein have the intent of encouraging changes in the quality of judging. The rules often call for on the spot interpretations of the rules. Judges with a vast pool of experience are better at making those decisions than others with less experience. They make careful reviews of situations and render correct interpretations of the rules without obviating them. They are to be congratulated. Handlers want to run under them. Placing these types of judges with less experienced ones leads to better judging all around.

Note:

The Rules which appear in this essay are excerpts from: *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 June 2017, Published by The American Kennel Club. ■

¹See: Dennis Bath & Francis Keenan. "Conventions in Field Trials: Progress & Problems." *Retriever News*. Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2017, pp. 20-25.