The Role of the Field Trial Committee
AUTHORITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY

By John Stracka

If you spend enough time around retriever field trials, you notice how different clubs perform. When a trial runs smoothly, dogs come to the line in order, tests flow, and everyone leaves believing folks paid attention to details. But when things break down—when rules are ignored, when running order becomes optional, when roles are not understood—it becomes immediately clear that something foundational is missing.

That "something missing" is almost always the Field Trial Committee not performing its intended function.

The AKC Retriever Field Trial Rules do not treat the committee as ceremonial. Quite the opposite. The rulebook places square responsibility for the conduct of the trial on this group of volunteers. The Field Trial Committee is charged with planning, managing, and conducting the event in accordance with AKC rules and policies.

From the AKC Retriever Field Trial Rules:

"The Field Trial Committee shall have full charge of the management of the trial." — *Chapter 1, Section 14*

That sentence is not ambiguous. It is not advisory. It is absolute. And yet, in practice, committees often start or drift into a passive role—deferring to judges, relying on stake marshals with their heads down playing with white board magnets and stepping in only when a handler complaint comes along or something has already gone wrong. That is not what the rules contemplate - instead the AKC Rulebook and AKC Dealing with Misconduct booklet specifically appoint the Field Trial Committee as its agent during the trial.

Where Authority Actually Belongs

Judges set tests and judging dogs is their primary function. But judges do not run the trial. The committee does. The rules make a clear structural distinction:

"Judges shall have full authority to judge the dogs, but shall not be responsible for the management of the trial."
—Chapter 1, Section 17

This separation is critical. It exists to protect both judging fairness and clarity of function. When committees fail to manage, judges are often forced—implicitly or explicitly—into roles they were never intended to fill. The judges and the field trial committee share equally in the proper application of rules and they need to operate as a team in doing so.

Important Committee Positions

There are two committee members that are often absent at trials and their roles are very important. The first is the all too often "ceremonial" Field Trial Secretary who stays at home and manages Entry Express. The second is the Field Trial Chief Marshal who often is not named at all in the premium. Incomplete Entry Express event filings have been a root cause of this omission.

Ref: Chapter 6, sections 1-5.

1.) The Field Trial Secretary plays a critical role at the trial and it is not just as an Entry Express clerk or scratch fee check writer, though that may be a task. The rulebook indicates they are intended to be at the trial and involved with administration, communication and misconduct matters.

2.) There is supposed to be a Chief Field Trial Marshal named in the premium and available at every trial. It's in the AKC event application and perhaps the AKC Performance Department should be returning applications as incomplete when the role is not defined.

Test Mechanics and Rule Compliance

Another area where committees must remain engaged is with test setup and eventual test execution. If any rule violation occurs, responsibility does not rest solely with judges. The field trial committee is the final checkpoint ensuring that what is presented to the dog complies with the rules. The judges and field trial committee should act as a team with the same goal.

For emphasis, the Field Trial Committee is the final word. If they deem a rule is being misapplied they have the final authority and shared responsibility for the outcome. Remember the Field Trial Committee selected the judges and they can "unselect" the non-cooperative individual. If they do, the committee "shall" report in the Secretary Report to AKC that there was a problem with the judging.

Running Order: Not Optional

One of the most common areas of breakdown at a trial is running order. It may seem like a logistical detail, but it is in fact a fairness mechanism dictated by the rulebook.

The rules state:

"Dogs shall be run in the order drawn, unless otherwise directed by the Field Trial Committee."
— Trial Procedure, Chapter 3

Note the structure: deviation is allowed—but only when directed by the committee or its Chief Marshal and for "significant" reasons - which does not mean "first come first serve" placement of a magnet on a whiteboard. The running order should not be recreated because a stake marshal is not properly instructed by the Chief Marshal regarding expediting the trial or it's inconvenient to keep up with handlers presented to run. The order should not be modified by the stake marshal. Not by convenience or by informal decision. It is the Chief Marshal's role to manage handlers between stakes and the Stake Marshal's role to run the dogs in order when presented and as directed by the committee/ Chief Marshal. That's it—pretty simple.

When dogs that are present and ready to run are skipped in favor of a "first come, first served" approach, the issue is not just unfairness—it is a failure of governance.

There is no provision in the rulebook granting the "stake marshal" authority to reorder dogs, prioritize handlers, or redefine procedure on their own. When that occurs, it is not an expansion of the marshal's role—it is a problem created by the field trial committee. A well-run trial makes this distinction clear before the first dog runs.

"Should" vs. "Shall": Not Just Semantics

A recurring source of inconsistency is the interpretation of "should" versus "shall" - simply put if there is a debate over the issue as it involves rules, the Field Trial Committee decision is the final word. They are responsible for the "rules" to the AKC - this is why the Secretary Report has a question in it as to if there was a problem with the judges!

THE ROLE OF THE FIELD TRIAL COMMITTEE

- "Shall" is mandatory.

- "Should" reflects a strong expectation rooted in standard practice.

Committees (and judges) that treat "should" as an optional convenience create variability between trials. Over time, that variability becomes the norm—and the rulebook becomes less of a standard and more a book of suggestions. Turning the Rulebook into a book of advice or options is not sustainable for a competitive sport. (Remember, if Mama said you should be home by 9pm - it's certain that she meant you "shall, must or will be" home by 9pm. It wasn't an option!)

When Committees Step Back, Problems Step Forward

The consequences of passive committees are predictable:

- Trials experience avoidable delays
- Running order becomes inappropriate and unfair
- Rules become suggestions
- Stake Marshals assume unintended authority
- Judges are placed in operational roles
- Confidence in the AKC and Clubs declines

None of these issues originate from a lack of rules. They originate from a lack of engagement and reinforcement.

What Effective Committees Actually Do

Strong Field Trial Committees are not usually reactive—they are anticipatory. When properly engaged they:

- Define roles with judges before the trial begins
- Establish expectations for stake marshals and workers
- Monitor the rules implementation at each stake
- Intervene early when deviations occur
- Provides a Chief Marshal issuing running orders to stake marshals across all stakes

Most importantly, they understand that their role is intended to be active. Not intrusive— but active and present.

Final Thought

A retriever field trial is a simple but complex game. Dogs, handlers, judges, grounds, rules, safety, finances, filings and workers all play a role in that complexity. And none of it functions properly without an engaged Field Trial Committee operating with purpose and structure.

The AKC rulebook assigns responsibility for that structure clearly:

"The Field Trial Committee shall have full charge of the management of the trial."

When committees embrace that responsibility, the sport operates as intended. When they do not, the system does not fail all at once—it degrades, one small compromise at a time. We have allowed the sport's execution and decorum to degrade and most of us have noticed. Let's try to put the intended structure back in the game! ■

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AKC Performance Events completely endorses and supports this article and its inferences. We fully recognize the importance of the areas discussed in this article, especially the roles and responsibilities of the Field Trial Committee. We have witnessed exactly what has been discussed here and have been reported by our Field Representatives. We have added this specific element to the areas the Field Representatives audit and include in their reports.

Additionally, while the Judges and Field Trial Committee should work closely as a team there may be instances where an agreement cannot be reached. As stated in this article, the Field Trial Committee has full jurisdiction for the management of the trial except those coming under the sole jurisdiction of the Judges, series to be run and the placement of the dogs. Even then when it comes to rule violations and safety the Committee has the final say. The protocol for a situation where the Judges and Committee cannot agree on an issue should be to call the Retriever Field Director or a Retriever Field Representative for clarification.

Russ Reavis
AKC Field Director for Retrievers

Citation Index – AKC Retriever Field Trial Rules

1. Chapter 1, Section 14

"The Field Trial Committee shall have full charge of the management of the trial."

2. Chapter 1, Section 17

"Judges shall have full authority to judge the dogs, but shall not be responsible for the management of the trial."

3. Chapter 3 – Trial Procedure

"Dogs shall be run in the order drawn, unless otherwise directed by the Field Trial Committee."

4. Chapter 3, Section 8, Pages 29–30

"No dry guns should be stationed in the field and visible to the dog while a marking test is run, or while the marking portion of a combination test is run."

5. Chapter 3 – Running Order (AKC Retriever Field Trial Rules)

"Dogs shall be run in the order drawn, unless otherwise directed by the Field Trial Committee."

This reinforces that only the Field Trial Committee—not the stake marshal—has authority to alter running order.

6. Marshal Role (Derived from Trial Procedure and Committee Authority Structure)

"The Field Trial Committee shall have full charge of the management of the trial."

Because the committee retains full management authority, any operational role such as the stake marshal functions under its direction and does not possess independent authority to alter procedure, including running order.

Interpretation:

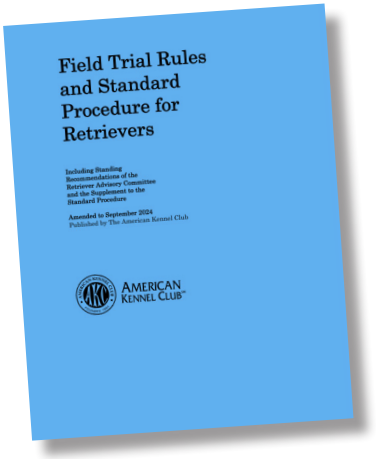
There is no rule granting stake marshals discretionary authority to change running order. Any such action must originate from or be approved by the Field Trial Committee or its Chief Marshal.

About the Author – John Stracka

John has contributed to our sport through leadership positions with Retriever News, Entry Express, National Clubs, Local Clubs, and as a fundraising liaison for Canine Health Foundation. John has also edited and curated hundreds of articles for Retriever News and has been a major contributor to the Judges Corner since 2010.

Stay tuned for additional articles on subjects like:

- *The Field Trial Committee's Responsibilities*
- *Running Order Integrity*
- *The "Should vs Shall" Debate*



Large Version of the AKC Rule Book is Now Available at the RN website!

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www.theretrievernews.com

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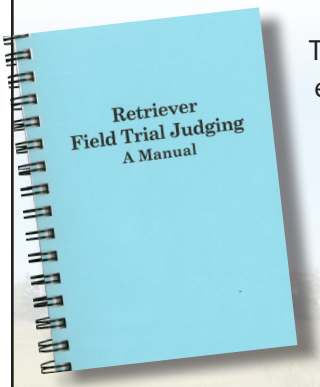

This manual represents the group effort of a number of field trialers across the country who, among themselves, represent more than 300 years in field trial competition, close to 1,000 points as field trial judges.

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