JUDGING
Retriever Field Trials
Let's Get Started

by Ron Ainley and David Morrison

WHERE PASSION MEETS PRECISION

Judging retriever field trials is more than a role—it is a calling that blends experience, mentorship, and a deep respect for both dogs and their handlers. Whether you are a seasoned competitor or just stepping into the world of field trials, the journey to becoming a respected judge is paved with learning, collaboration, and a genuine passion for our sport. It incorporates our love and appreciation for these wonderful animals and an appreciation for the process for testing and recognizing natural ability and training.

FROM PICNIC TRIALS TO MODERN TESTS

The roots of judging often trace back to club and informal "picnic" trials. Before the 1980s, retriever clubs hosted non-licensed sanctioned events alongside licensed trials, offering newcomers a welcoming entry point. These "training with ribbons" days allowed novices to run their dogs, help judge, and learn from seasoned competitors. Judging alongside an experienced "8-point judge" was a rite of passage, fostering a culture of mentorship and camaraderie.

As hunting tests gained popularity, and the proliferation of Licensed

Field Trials, these fun trials faded, but the skills learned, especially time management and courtesy—remain invaluable. Today, hunting tests serve as the new starting point for field trial performance, and the judging lessons learned here transfer seamlessly to judging licensed events.

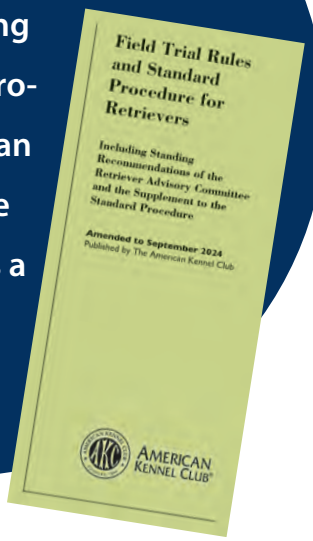
OUR RULE BOOK

Probably the first thing you want to do is to get your hands on our Rule Book: "Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedures for Retrievers.""Including Standing Recommendations of the Retriever Advisory Committee and the Supplement to the Standard Procedure." Reading our rule book and understanding it will take some work on your part. You can obtain one from the AKC by going to their website: www.akc.org/sports/retrievers/field-trials. Once there, click on "Club Resources" and there you will find a PDF of our Rule Book among other helpful resources. For true beginners, we highly suggest you find a mentor to help you with this journey. More on this later.

TRAINING: THE JUDGE'S FOUNDATION

Training your own dog, or collaborating with a professional trainer, is a cornerstone of effective judging. This firsthand experience helps judges understand the nuances of test setup, wind, lighting, terrain, and bird placement. It also fosters empathy and respect for handlers, dogs, and the volunteers who make events possible. In training groups, rotating the responsibility for setups encourages learning and prevents dominance. Constructive criticism, rather than dictation, helps everyone grow.

As you read our Rule Book, understanding the difference between "shall" and "should" is necessary to applying rules, standards, and procedures. "Shall" means an obligation or strict rule while "should" is used as a recommendation or advice.



LEARNING THROUGH EXPERIENCE

Running your own dog through setups provides insight into test quality. Is it too easy or too difficult? Evaluating each mark and blind for its degree of difficulty is essential. If dogs fail, do not rush to scrap the test—ask why they failed and what can be learned from this experience. Group discussions after training sessions are invaluable, preparing judges for their next assignment. Seek out opportunities to volunteer at a licensed event in a variety of positions. A broad perspective of the requirements to conduct a trial helps new judges understand the importance of organization and time management.

THE POWER OF MENTORSHIP

Finding a mentor you respect is essential. Their experience and insight can guide you through the complexities of test setups and evaluation. Seek feedback from reputable professionals and amateurs; those who work with dogs daily have a unique perspective.

COMMON SENSE, RESPECT, AND ETHICS

Judging is not about pleasing everyone. Not all contestants will agree with your decisions, but collaboration and respect for your fellow judges are vital. Be a student of the sport—study what makes tests challenging, participate in educational opportunities, adopt a mentor, and familiarize yourself with the rule book and sportsman ethics. Judging is an honor, not an obligation or burden.

COLLABORATION AND CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

Communication with your co-judge and field trial committee is key. Walk the grounds to understand the subtleties of terrain and cover. Setting up good tests is both a science and an art—collaboration is essential. Keep notes and diagrams of tests; these records help identify what made them challenging. Maintain a list of imperatives you believe are essential for good judging and successful trials.

EVALUATING DOG WORK: STANDARDS AND FAIRNESS

The foundation for evaluating dog work should always be based on the standards and procedures in the rule book:

"The supplement presents guidance to Judges in grading the performances of the dogs so that there will be greater uniformity in the penalties assessed for various faults."

Agreeing with your co-judge on what is acceptable and unacceptable before the trial is critical. Major faults that are the basis for elimination are well defined and nonnegotiable. Moderate and minor faults, however, may be weighted differently based on one's perspective. Discussing these and setting guidelines with your co-judge is of extreme importance and eliminates any bias. Evaluation should be based on the performance of the dog and handler.

HONORING TRADITION, EMBRACING PROGRESS

Judging retriever field trials is a multifaceted skill, built on experience, mentorship, and a commitment to embrace collaboration, respect the sport's traditions and continually seek improvement. Judges honor both the dogs and the community that make these events possible.

Judging field trials is everyone's responsibility who competes in our sport. It is an obligation to give back to our sport and the great animals that compete. However, many of us view it as a great opportunity to learn as we watch handlers and their animals work together. You will learn a lot about handling your own retriever while judging and observing great handlers. Just pay attention, you'll be rewarded in the end. ■

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