WHAT'S WRONG WITH DRY GUNS?

Why a Holding Blind Used Only for a Blind Planter Cannot Be in the Field During a Marking Test

By John Stracka

Introduction

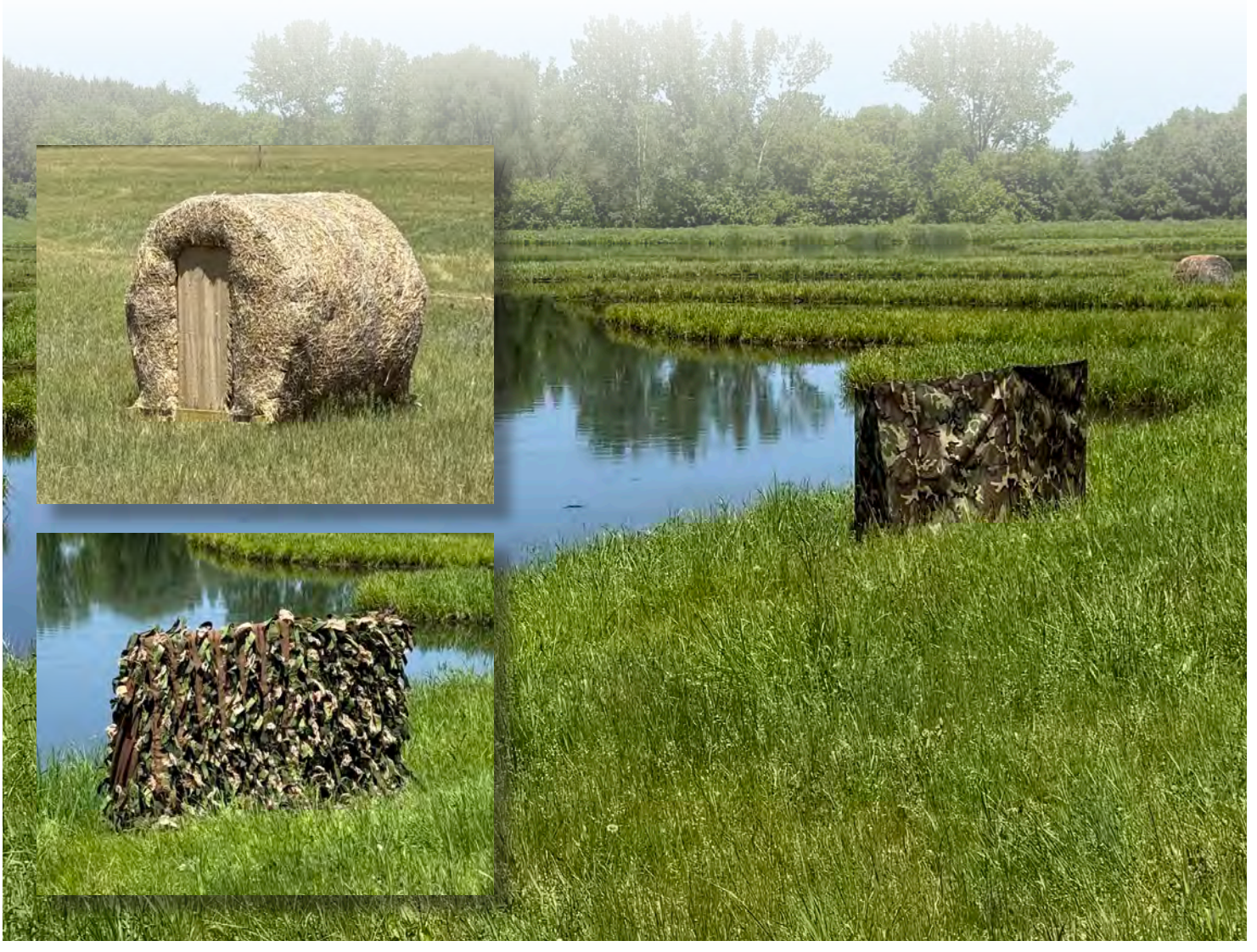
In an AKC Retriever Field Trial, the integrity of a marking test depends on presenting the dog with a clear and fair memory challenge based solely on the fall of the birds. The guns should be conspicuous and the birds plainly visible in the air and as they fall for all dogs.

The rules governing the placement of guns, blinds and personnel exist to ensure that dogs are not influenced by artificial cues unrelated to the fall itself which can confuse or trick the dogs into mismarking the fall area.

Let's evaluate a split/marking and blind combination test scenario in which:

- A retired gunner throws a mark and retires behind a properly concealed holding blind (or ghillie blanket).
- A second holding blind (or ghillie blanket) is placed in the field for a blind planter who will set a bird for a blind retrieve.
- That second holding blind (ghillie blanket) is visible to the dog during the marking portion of the test.

Under the AKC Retriever Field Trial Rulebook, the presence of that second holding blind during the marking test is inconsistent with both the rules and the intent of the marking evaluation.



WHAT'S WRONG WITH DRY GUNS?

Relevant AKC Rulebook Provisions

(Trial Procedure, Section 8, pp. 29–30)

Rule 1 – No Dry Guns Visible (a holding blind/Ghillie blanket without active gunners/throwers) - "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 mark/blind test is run."

Rule 2 – Retired Gun Concealment - "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."

Rule 3 – Restriction on Field Blinds "No blinds shall be placed in the field in a marking test except in accordance with the provisions set forth in this paragraph or for the purpose of protecting the running dogs from injury by unseen hazards."

Why the Rule Exists

The restriction on holding blinds (ghillie blankets) during marking tests exists to preserve the integrity of the marking evaluation. The rule exists to avoid tricking the dog by using false landmarks. Retrievers are patterned through training to mark off objects like holding blinds, specifically because they are reliable landmarks to the dog.

Marking tests are designed to evaluate:

- the dog's ability to watch the fall
- memory of the fall location
- depth, spatial and scenting perception of the fall
- accurate retrieval based on the fall itself

Allowing a visible holding blind unrelated to the mark introduces an artificial visual reference point or landmark. Dogs are trained and naturally use objects in the field such as holding blinds as landmarks (which is generally the reason Judges have guns walk/retire inappropriately long distances from throwing locations - to draw the dog away from the bird). A holding blind placed in the field can become a working reference point that confuses or tricks the dog as to the location of the fall, which undermines the function and purpose of the marking test.

Judges' Practical Guidance

In practice, conscientious Judges handle this combination test issue in several ways consistent with the rulebook:

- The blind planters blind is not visible to the dog, totally avoiding potential confusion with the marking sequence of the test.
- The blind planter is hidden using terrain features rather than a visible holding blind that may confuse the dogs.
- The blind planter enters the field only after all marks have been thrown and retrieved, thereby keeping them completely out of the picture.

These approaches ensure that no unnecessary equipment is visible to the dog during the marking portion of the test.

Conclusion

Under the AKC Retriever Field Trial Rulebook (Trial Procedure, Section 8, pp. 29–30), holding blinds in the Field during a marking test or marking portion of a combination/split test are permitted only when they conceal active retired guns or to protect dogs from hazards.

A holding blind/ghillie blanket placed in the field, which may interfere with a mark, solely concealing a blind planter does not meet either of these conditions. Because it introduces visible manmade equipment or landmarks unrelated to the marking presentation, its presence during the marking portion of a test is inconsistent with both the rules and the intent of the marking evaluation.

Marking tests challenge natural ability. Training develops that marking skill by using landmarks (holding blinds) as visual cues relative to the area of the fall. Accordingly, a holding blind used only for concealment of a blind planter shall not remain visible in the Field while a marking test is being run. ■

Reviewed and approved by the Performance Events at AKC
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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.

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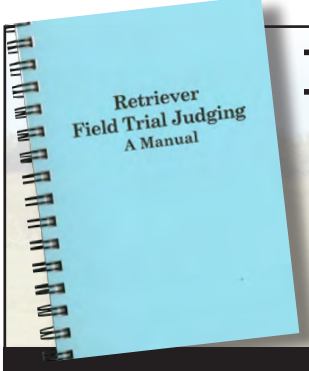

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