

Conventions

By Dennis Bath and Francis Keenan

Introduction

Good Judges need no advice from us. We do not expect poor Judges to change. It has been our aim from the start of this series of essays to provide sound advice for Judges who desire to learn and for Judges who are just beginning. It is the latter group which may profit the most from this series. Perhaps some learning may occur leading to improvement in the overall effectiveness of judging.

“Old timers” would be surprised by what passes now as an AKC retriever field trial. Marking tests have evolved from doubles to triples, quads, and even “quints” or five fallen birds to retrieve. They might see three or four retired guns. There is no cocktail party, seldom a Saturday night dinner, and very little camaraderie despite the fact that costs are sky rocketing. The “fun” parts of the gathering have disappeared.

The dogs have progressed in their ability to manage unique tests as proven by the history of these events

and, as a result, testing has also advanced in character in attempts to keep pace with these talented animals and their trainers. Quality work by more dogs has led to the development of “conventions.”

Conventions

What are conventions anyway? In the sense used herein, they have nothing to do with political types of conventions. There is another meaning for the word and it is:

an ‘agreement concerning a practice customary in usage, not mentioned in the *Rules*, and which is generally acceptable to practitioners.’¹

Here are a few selected “conventions” to be discussed: the ‘delayed marks’ test; the use of mats as “the line”; out of sight areas of the fall; extremely large entries; shooting live fliers into a test; ‘in’ throws; angled water entries for Derby dogs; the methods used for retiring gunners; and, dropping dogs when their



Photo by Mark Atwater

in Field Trials

Progress & Problems



Conventions in Field Trials

only fault has been a single “pop” or “cast refusal” on a blind retrieve.

Unusual tests are encouraged by the *Rules*² which provide the important basic principles of the activity. Rules for field trials cannot be written to clarify every potential occurrence. Judges must use rational common sense to resolve issues not found or discussed in the *Rules*. The principle that establishes the need for unique challenges to the skills of field trial retrievers is:

Ingenuity on the part of the Judges is encouraged, not only in planning customary tests, but also in devising some which are unusual and quite different from those customarily used at field trials. However, all such unusual tests must conform to “conditions met in an ordinary day’s shoot,” and they should not require complicated instructions about the desired method of completing the test. (*Rules*, p. 44.)

It is our studied opinion that field trial retrievers have become so well bred and trained that many Judges in the various stakes have had difficulty in raising their standards and tests to levels approaching the skills of the dogs. In other words, the retrievers have out-performed Judges who have not been capable of setting worthy tests for these highly accomplished retrievers. The result is, for example, a test like the ‘delayed marks’ test, an attempt to stretch the dogs’ memories. It took very little time for them to be trained to do these tests quite well. The ‘delayed marks’ test provides us with a good example upon which to begin a discussion of **conventions**.

Mixed Tests

The quoted *Rule* about ingenuity is used by Judges to justify the setting of a ‘delayed marks’ test. The instructions³ are, variously, that the handler, after retrieving a fall or falls, must send the dog on a blind retrieve(s) before finishing the retrieve of the other birds which fell in the marking portion of the test. There are issues with respect to ‘delayed marks’ testing.

The test runs the risk of eliminating dogs that fail the blind portion before those dogs have been adequately tested for their marking ability. Remember that basic principle? MARKING IS OF PRIMARY IMPORTANCE! Some dogs, failing the blind, are “picked up” by the handler, never completing the marking portion of this setup. These examples constitute, in our opinion, a violation of the basic principle clearly stated in the *Rules* several times that ... **marking is of primary importance**. For this reason, the Judges we know best and respect do not use this test.

The ‘delayed marks’ test is a “mixed test.” There is nothing in the *Rules* about “mixed tests.” The test mixes a blind retrieve test with a marking test in one series. That ‘delayed marks’ tests are “mixed tests” is proven by the fact that Judges provide two scores: one for the blind retrieve(s) and another for the marking portion. That is two series cramped into one. It is worth noting that the cited *Rule* about ingenuity in developing tests ends with the words ... “of completing the test.” The word ... “test” ... therein, is singular. The ‘mixed test’ scenario is a plurality of tests intertwined in a fashion never anticipated by the *Rules*.

A further issue with respect to ‘delayed marks’ tests is that they include instructions. Instructions cannot override the *Rules*. If this were possible, then one may as well throw the rule book away for good. Many handlers think the rule book has already disappeared in the minds of many Judges and Field Trial Committees. Currently, the *Rules* permit a handler, once the handler’s number is called, to send for any fall in any order desired once the birds are down and the dog’s number has been called.

The *Rule* is:

“On marked retrieves the order in which birds are to be retrieved shall not be specified by the Judges. The handler is free to select the order in which he directs his dog to retrieve the birds provided that such selection should be accomplished quietly and promptly.” (*Rules*, p. 30.)

The instruction to run a blind retrieve in the midst of doing marks prohibits the handler from engaging the right to continue sending the dog for marks. An instruction or order to run a blind in the midst of a marking test is in violation of that *Rule*. The central question is this: **can the *Rule* be interrupted and changed by instructions from Judges?**

All of this is not to say that the “mixed test” is not valuable. Conditions as faced in this type of test are encountered in natural hunting situations. The *Rules* need to catch up with reality when it comes to “mixed tests” or the rules and principles about marks being of primary importance become meaningless. Judges must become more concerned with marking ability than with handling skills when setting marking tests.

Remember This:

retrievers are breeds aimed at bringing to their handler shot game birds which they see fall and that is their central purpose irrespective of the activity in which they are engaged.

It is marking first and foremost; handling adds polish and finish to these remarkable animals. Shouldn’t all-age tests reflect this reality?

If that is not enough about ‘delayed marks’ and mixed tests, then reflect upon this episode. In 1978 at the National Open conducted at the Busch Wildlife Area west of St. Louis, Missouri, the Judges devised a land double with a thrown dead bird and a shot flier. A land blind was added making it a “mixed test.” The head marshal was Dennis Bath. He was told to instruct every handler that after the first bird of the double was delivered, the handler was to then run the land blind prior to sending for the remaining bird in the marking test. This test drew much consternation and raised questions among the handlers and gallery. The Field Trial Committee met to review the test. They rendered this decision:

‘After handlers have completed the blind portion of the test, the retrieve of the remaining mark will be judged as a land blind.’

The Marshal was instructed to inform every handler about this decision prior to their testing. Dennis was quite nervous when telling the handlers that if they let their dogs hunt that last bird anywhere off line instead of handling, they were likely to be in trouble as it was being judged as a blind.⁴ WOW! How is that decision as a precedent? Are current Judges who set “mixed tests” aware of this precedent? Are they judging it all wrong? The *Rules* need to address the issues in “mixed tests.”

Mats and the Line

For years, the “line” from which a dog was to start retrieving was designated by things like a long stick or tree branch, log chains, paint stripes sprayed upon the ground, ribbons tied at the perimeters of the line, and sometimes the Judges would simply say ... ‘take a position there in front of us where you are comfortable.’ Then came the “mat.” This development traces to the use of large carpets for the “line” in the National stakes several decades ago. These stakes found that hay was not suitable for keeping the line dry. The use of some form of a mat followed and this development has had widespread usage at field trials and has been viewed as a positive convention. Retrievers do not enjoy the command to ‘sit’ on the line when it is a mud hole, or a water-

logged mess, especially if the ground is cold. Some merely continue to stand. They are easier to control when sitting. Also, stylish dogs leave the line with gusto. A well-anchored mat provides them a solid start made without slipping and sliding. The use of mats has some attendant issues. Here is the **Rule** which applies to the line.

“When coming to line to be tested, and while on line, the dog and handler assume such positions as may be directed by the Judges.” (Rules, p. 28.) And: “When ordered to retrieve, the handler shall direct his dog from any position designated by the Judges.” (Rules, p. 31.)

There is an important caveat with respect to written instructions about mats often placed in the holding blind for the handlers to read. Calling a dog's number (or saying ... “dog” ...) constitutes a “release.” The **Rule** which applies is that once a dog's number has been called, the handler is free to send the dog irrespective of its position. As aside, the use of the term “dog” to release has become another well established if poor convention since the **Rules** unequivocally state that a number should be called. (**Rules**, p. 30, and p. 45.)

“In all stakes, after the Judges have directed that a dog be ordered to retrieve, that dog is entitled to run in and retrieve.” (Rules, p. 34.)

If the Judges want dogs on the mat for that first retrieve and after it has crept off it, the Judge calling numbers must instruct the handler to heel the dog onto the mat **prior to calling its number**. The instructions, if any, with respect to the position to be taken by the handlers and dogs on line must be clearly stated, including information about when and, if handlers can move, where and how far.

Do not use small mats that look like postage stamps to handlers. Put a substantial mat on the line. Asking a handler to be on a small mat is simply unfair. Requiring both dog and handler to be on a small mat is ridiculous. Mats are an advance in tactics when the mat is a large one. If a small one is used, just forget instructions and let it provide a starting point and perhaps act as a water blotter.

Out of Sight Area of the Fall

We have been astonished at the number of marks at licensed field trials that fall where the handler and Judges cannot see the dog hunt in the area of the fall. This is especially disconcerting. It is simply a fact that Judges cannot judge what they cannot see. This issue is not concerned with falls behind bushes or hedges or other cover where the dog near it cannot go elsewhere without quickly becoming visible. It is about not being able to see any of the area of the fall. Judges have been known to say that they make a decision about the score for one of these hidden areas based upon the amount of time it takes the dog to come up with the bird and reappear. **WHAT?**

The gallery is often in a better position to see the area of these hidden falls than are the Judges. Dogs have left the area of the fall unseen before returning to it, have popped, or have stopped their hunts unknown by the Judges. Judges cannot see whether a flier was killed or crippled, moved or ran off; or, if the dog was reluctant to pick up a live bird. They cannot see the stylish work of dogs with a fast pickup. And, handlers cannot see a dog that leaves the fall for another until it is often too late. Timing a hidden retrieve to score it is negligent judging.

Put the falls where the dogs can be seen by the Judges and the handler when in the area of the fall. If Judges do not know what the “area of the fall” is ... read the rule book! Hidden falls are not an acceptable method for increasing the difficulty of a mark. Placing falls where the dog cannot be seen when hunting is a practice which must end. It is NOT an acceptable convention. Field Trial Committees must not let tests with the area of the fall completely hidden from view commence. Seeing a bird in the air as it falls is permissible. No vision of the work-

ing dog in the area of the fall is not fair to handlers and their dogs. Field Trial Committees are negligent for permitting illegal tests to proceed. They should be reported to the AKC.

Extremely Large Entries

What constitutes an extremely large number of entries in an all-age stake? For purposes of discussion, we consider 100 entries in an Open stake to be excessive. Also, in Amateur stakes which have only two days to complete testing, any number over 70 dogs is an excessive number. Why? Well, the Judges facing large entries are in a dilemma. They must set tests that take little time and run the risk of being too simple. Or, they must devise extreme tests that take more time and are aimed at causing large numbers of dogs to fail. Both of these approaches violate stated principles in the **Rules**. For instance:

“To the extent that time permits, Judges should be generous in their ‘callbacks’ for additional series.” (Rules, p. 47.)

And, Judges are cautioned to avoid

“... tests which are too difficult and time-consuming, or too ‘tricky,’ hence, apparently designed to produce many failures or eliminations.” (Rules, p. 43.)

The Judges facing large entries are damned if they do and damned if they don't. Large entries work against **balanced tests** forcing Judges to set tests that assist the completion of the stake in good time but which obviate basic principles in the **Rules**. A **balanced test** is one that has some excellent work, more moderately good work, and some failures and which leads to fairness in callbacks as opposed to tests that have too many callbacks or too few.

Large entries create an atmosphere at field trials which is difficult for all involved. No one wishes to wait for hours, sometimes all day, for an opportunity to run a dog in the first series. Judges are faced with arriving early and staying late in the field and have less time to find and discuss test sites and tests, especially if a wind change has all but destroyed their plans for an upcoming water blind. They are rushed at every turn. Bad weather makes the situation even worse, especially for workers in the field. It is no wonder that so many field trial participants now find the training of retrievers to be more enjoyable than competing in field trials.

Extreme testing and large entries have created a situation where many worthy, exciting, and well trained retrievers are not called back. This happens because:

“... it is the consensus of the Judges that it would be impossible for him to “place” in the stake, even though his work in all succeeding series was perfect.” (Rules, p. 47.)

How can this be? Well, without that **Rule**, Judges would sometimes run out of time. The Judges can eliminate dogs with nearly perfect work because there are other entries that have done a ‘hair’ better to that point and would place ahead of the dropped ones if the trial were to end at that moment. The Judges must get done and water tests take more time. This **Rule** permits them to decrease the number of dogs to suitable numbers by dropping dogs with good work up to that point. Large entries contribute to this conundrum and create much consternation and disappointment among handlers.

Despite efforts to control large entries, they persist. The conducting of field trials on the same dates at nearby locations has not succeeded in lowering the number of entries. There must be a better way forward for the management of large entries. They have chased away people who no longer desired to endure the hardships posed by large entries and extreme tests. Younger generations of retriever owners have scurried to more friendly pursuits. The need for a cadre of younger people to carry on the traditions of retriever field trials has significantly nar-

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rowed leaving an aging population of loyal enthusiasts to do the work of field trials. What does this state of affairs portend for the future?

There is no solace in a critical analysis like this, especially since we are not offering potential resolutions to the problem of large entries. We could; but, our ideas might be more controversial to many than is the current state of affairs. Perhaps other minds will be able to address the issue of large entries and find a workable solution.

Shooting Fliers into the Test

Live fliers should not be shot into the midst of a test. Shooting them into a test where retrievers must travel closely for other marks creates a general unfairness. How is that? Well, fliers are notorious for not falling in the same place. Some are very long and others short or wide. The use of launching equipment does not alter the problem and may exacerbate it by providing very long flying birds. It is well known to gunners that a lively hen pheasant or duck will come racing out of the hand or launcher at a high rate of speed so that when it is shot, the arc of its fall carries it much further. Too many Judges are reluctant to call a “no bird” when a flier has landed out of the places where most of them have fallen. Fliers create strong desire in retrievers. Asking some to run through a flier fall to go on to another mark when the other entries have not been so challenged is a failure to keep the test nearly the same for all the dogs.

It is possible in some instances to shoot a live bird into the test. The nature of the terrain including hillsides, bowls, deep pits, and the like may provide an opportunity to fairly shoot a flier into the test. Also, the “wipe out” bird is excluded from this convention. Generally, fliers must not be shot into a test for the reasons given.

“In” Throws

An “in” throw is one where the bird is pitched toward the line. There is nothing in the *Rules* about “in” throws. Novice Judges may not know that an “in” throw is difficult for retrievers. These dogs have drive, power, and speed and have been trained to run or swim to the area where the thrower was located and past that point. Very few of them will hunt back toward the line. Other Judges who know this may include an “in” throw to intentionally increase the difficulty of a mark. We recommend against this practice.

Those who have hunted with retrievers know that they naturally hunt away from them. Or, they quarter but do not normally hunt toward them. Because field trial retrievers are trained to drive by the guns for angled back throws, it is not uncommon for dogs to hunt excessively for a bird thrown “in,” especially if it falls in heavy cover. A big hunt on an “in” bird usually gets them eliminated. This is grossly unfair.

An “in” flier can be very difficult. If the running dog is released when the fall should have been called a “no bird” and hunts and eventually leaves the area where the other fliers fell and hunts in and gets the bird, the dog should be judged for an **intelligent** hunt rather than being scored down or dropped.

We have seen the ‘two down the shore’ test in Derby stakes where both birds were thrown “in.” The dogs are trained for weeks to swim by those guns for this test. While not an illegal test, this sort of trickery indicates a lack of understanding or respect concerning young retrievers and their training and habits.

Field Trial Committees must not let tests with the area of the fall completely hidden from view commence. Seeing a bird in the air as it falls is permissible. No vision of the working dog in the area of the fall is not fair to handlers and their dogs. Field Trial Committees are negligent for permitting illegal tests to proceed.

There have been instances when a dog in the last series and in excellent position to win or place has missed an “in” thrown bird and suffered the consequences in the final summing. We train on “in” throws consistently for we know that there will be times when we will see them again. The convention against “in” throws is a good one and we support it.

Angled Water Entries in the Derby Stake

The Derby stake is mainly about marking and natural abilities.

“... in Derby stakes the ability to “mark” is all-important ...”
(*Rules*, p. 50.)

Style is also important in the judging of Derby dogs. It is a natural ability. Of little consequence for Derby dogs, according to the *Rules*, are skills acquired through training with these exceptions: they should display general obedience, be reasonably steady; and, deliver to hand.

An angled entry into water is NOT a natural ability. It must be learned and therefore falls into the category of an “acquired ability” learned through training. Derby Judges need to find places to test Derby dogs during each water series that do not require an angled entry. Otherwise, they will be providing an advantage to dogs which have learned angled entries. Also, extremely tight marks encourage switching and create a poor setup for testing marking in Derby dogs. This is because teaching dogs not to switch is also an acquired ability learned through training. Spread those marks and use the terrain, the wind, the direction of the throw and the order of the fall to increase difficulty.

We know that most dogs now competing in the Derby stake have learned to take an angle into the water on a line to a mark. The widespread use of angled entries into water are performed well by young Derby dogs and are an indication of the advances made in their training. The *Rules* simply are behind the times with respect to this issue. Judges, when scoring Derby dogs, do your best to abide by the basic principle that the testing of Derby dogs is mainly about the natural abilities of marking and style and remember it when summing results.

Methods for Retiring Guns and Gunners

Moving gunners while dogs are working is unfair treatment of the working dogs. It is a major distraction and has a profound effect upon a retriever on its way to a mark. For this reason, a few years ago, the *Rule* with respect to retiring guns was updated.

“After birds have been shot, all Guns shall remain quiet and shall not move their positions unless and until so instructed by the Judges. Judges may instruct Guns and their associated bird thrower to retire from the sight of the dog, or dogs, on line provided that every reasonable efforts must be made to insure that the movement of retired Guns is only permitted at a time and under conditions to minimize the chance that the running dog will be distracted by such movements. The permitted movement of retired Guns and their associated bird throwers should be limited to the minimum distance required for effective concealment. Such retirement should be in a direction away from the direction in which the bird is thrown. 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 and in no event shall gunners or throwers be instructed to lay down on the ground in layout blinds or like configurations for hiding purposes. The blind must be so located as to minimize the development of a trail that will lead the running dog away from the area of the fall. In no circumstances should the judges have the guns move to another position to mislead dogs in their marking.” (*Rules*, p. 29-30.)

Well, what does “minimum distance” suggest? How far can the guns be permitted to move? There are too many times at field trials when Judges move a considerable distance. Not only is this a violation of the *Rules*, it creates a scent path and a trap for the retrievers. We consider a “minimum distance” to mean ... ONLY A FEW STEPS where “a few steps” means 4-5 of them which is 12-15 feet and no more. Even less movement than this is better suggesting as little movement as is possible given the circumstances should be the guide for Judges. When guns are to move to retire is extremely important and must be made clear to the gunners and throwers.

If a handler thinks that a gun or gunners have intentionally moved to distract the handler’s dog, that handler has every right to file a complaint with the Judges and seek a re-run. A complaint can also be filed with the Field Trial Committee.

There are times when the Judges do not effectively hide the retired guns. They are asked simply to sit behind those big round hay bales or some other large object. This is not acceptable. When a dog runs by a partially hidden gun station, they often see the guns and alter their hunt. The altered hunt may get them dropped. Retired gunners are to be hidden completely from view.

Judges must seek test sites that lend themselves not only to a worthy test, but also provide for the retiring of guns in a manner consistent with the *Rules*. Excessive movement to retire is not an acceptable convention. We are pleased to say that we have watched many fine Judges who have worked diligently to hide retiring sites while keeping them close to the guns.

A “Pop” or “Cast Refusal” on a Blind Retrieve

A “pop” occurs when a dog stops on a blind retrieve and looks to the handler without having been commanded to stop. This is a MINOR FAULT on the first occurrence. A “pop” is a

“... failure to hold the line or take the handler’s directions ... ”
(*Rules*, p. 58.)

We have experienced, as have many others, being dropped from further testing when the only fault our retriever displayed to that point was a single “pop” on a blind retrieve or a single cast refusal. A single “pop” on a mark is a serious matter and that is not what is being discussed. The *Rules* stipulate that a single “pop” is a minor fault. This gives deference to the dog at the first occurrence. The Judges may not have heard a whistle from another stake that the dog heard; the dog may have heard some other noise. The dog gets the benefit of the doubt on the first instance of a “pop” during a blind retrieve. Repeated “pops” are more serious faults.

There is another situation concerning a “pop.” It sometimes occurs that a dog on a line into water “pops” at the water’s edge or near to it. Was

the dog reneging on a water entry? This type of a “pop,” failure to enter water when commanded, is a serious fault and should be judged as such.

(*Rules, Serious Faults, No. 2. “Failure to enter ... water ... ”*, p. 57.)

A single cast refusal is a minor fault for the same kinds of reasons. Was the sun behind the handler? Was there movement behind the handler? Was the handler’s effort unseen because of something white in the background? These, and perhaps other questions are the reasons that the first cast refusal is a minor fault.

Judges, do NOT drop dogs which have as their only glaring weakness a single “pop” or a single “cast refusal” on a blind retrieve. These are MINOR FAULTS. This happens too often and we are opposed to a style of judging which is in a hurry to eliminate dogs rather than in testing them thoroughly.

Summary

We reviewed some conventions now part of field trials. There are always new ideas which, once initiated, become part of judging practice. They are copied by other Judges. The selected conventions discussed herein, were: the “delayed marks test; the use of mats as “the line”; out of sight areas of the fall; extremely large entries; shooting live fliers into a test; ‘in’ throws; angled water entries for Derby dogs; the methods used for retiring guns and gunners, and dropping dogs with only one “pop” or “cast refusal” on a blind when the previous work has been good. Some of these tactics were shown to be intelligent advances while others were found to be in violation of a *Rule* or **basic principle**. Our advice to Judges attempting some unique approach to testing retrievers is to think carefully about whether the plan violates any **basic principles** or *Rules*. And also, it was clear that the *Rule* book has some catching up to do.

Good luck, Judges. We are pulling for you and wish you every success in finding the best retrievers to place at the field trials you are to judge. ■

¹*Websters New World Dictionary*. New York: Warner Books, Inc., 1987, p. 138.

²*Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers*. Raleigh, NC: Published by The American Kennel Club, Amended to October 2015. [Hereinafter, simply *Rules*.] Rules are established guides and regulations for the conducting of an activity.

³Instructions are orders or directions. *Websters*, p. 315. Rules are established regulations for conduct. *Websters*, p. 522. Instructions assist in support of the *Rules*.

⁴Dennis did not desire to be in a position of telling contestants how to handle their dogs. Thanks go to Dennis for providing this insight into the history of “mixed tests.”

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