Damned Straight[1]

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Photo of Scott Leonescu and "Hawk" by Karen Stewart

Judging the Initial Line

THIS ESSAY ADDRESSES A POINT OF VIEW concerning the initial lines taken by retrievers during blind retrieve tests. These lines should be judged with more rigor. The discussion does not address other parts of the blind retrieve while recognizing their importance. Initial lines on blinds should be carefully observed and recorded by Judges.

Consider this. On a blind test, there are no obstacles directly in front of the dog on line. Judges are usually very lenient in the amount of time they provide for the handlers to prepare the dog before sending it. As a result, expectations are quite high and dogs should perform well at least on the initial line to the blind. For example: prior to the send handlers may talk to the dog; they ensure that it is sitting; they may check its spine to see if it is aligned with the line to the blind; they check the eyes to see if the dog is looking in the proper direction; they check their stance to see whether they are standing so as to push or pull the dog from the intended line; they look at the front paws to see that they properly set for a good start, they pat their legs and snap fingers to move the dog; they often use a hand over the head of the dog; they adjust the position of the dog until finally they command it to retrieve. Given all of this, some dogs leave the line at a sharp angle nowhere near to the direction given by the handler.

Just think about that for a moment. That behavior is, at a very minimum, a minor cast refusal. Without intervening factors, to be discussed, it should be judged as more than a minor fault. We leave that to the Judges. It is our aim to call attention to it.

When a wide start happens, a quick stop whistle and handle usually ensues if not a loud "here" command and a "pickup." A better performance is expected at the start because of the preparation and time handlers have when the dog is beside them. Sometimes a dog will recover well from a poor start and continue to do good work on the blind. Judges normally consider the work done by all the dogs being tested. If most do well at the start then it is likely that a wide start will receive a penalty. If however, most dogs have trouble at the start, then Judges are more likely to be lenient concerning poor initial lines.

There is an shibboleth among judges that good blinds have a problem at the start, in the middle, and near to the end. These kinds of blinds are not always accessible to the Judges in a natural environment. Then the Judges must often create some problems or diversions.

Diversions are often placed directly in front of and across the line to the blind such as a canoe or boat. There may be cover or a corner of water fronting the line to the blind. Sometimes the initial line is over an earthen mound. There may be a chair close to the line with someone sitting in it. These diversions create problems for the dogs and handlers and increase the difficulty of the initial line. A poor initial line under these kinds of circumstances is judged on the basis of the performance of all the dogs in the test. A dog that misses the obstacle when most do not is likely to receive a strong penalty. Also, when most all the dogs are having difficulty with the obstacle, the penalty for a poor start, if any, is less harsh. Then the question becomes one of how well the dogs handled when missing the desired initial line. Most Judges provide a score which is relative to the general line taken to the blind. That score can then be used when comparing the work of the dogs when the test has been completed.

Judges may have different views of these matters which is fair enough. Handlers wish to see consistency from the Judges so that the dogs are scored in the same fashion. We are fortunate to have so many excellent Judges with good common sense concerning these matters and that commodity, common sense, is not part of the rules for judges and neophyte judges can profit by judging with them.

It is worth mentioning what the rules have to say about moderate and serious faults as they pertain to initial lines on blind retrieves. Moderate Faults: *"Failure to take lines and directions … "* (**Rules,** p. 58.) Serious Faults: *"out of control, (as) paying no attention to directions by the handler."* (**Rules,** p. 58.) And, *'A considerable penalty should be imposed for repeated, willful disobedience of the handlers orders given prior to the send … '* (**Rules,** p. 55.) That certainly is a clear statement! These faults describe the performance of dogs that leave the line wide left or right. A wide initial line should be judged as at least a moderate fault and perhaps a serious one if the behavior is repeated on subsequent blind retrieves. There are other rules which address this topic.

The rules state:

"A dog sent on a blind retrieve shall at once proceed in the general direction of the line given by the handler. A dog that fails to do so shall, in the absence of unusual extenuating circumstances, be eliminated from the stake." (***Rules,***[2] p. 36.)

That is pretty clear and a tough pill to swallow. This rule applies to "no goes." The term 'general,' as in *"the general direction,"* means the dog has left the line. It needs some clarification as it is not a "fudge word" which permits the interpretation that wide left or right initial lines should not receive a penalty. The definition of "general" as used in the rule, involves the more obvious features of the blind and the initial line. These are the **control, precision,** and the **detail** of it.[3] A line taken that cannot, if continued, lead to the blind plant, is not in the "general direction" of it and lacks the main characteristics of precision and control needed to start on the correct line or close to it. And there is this part of the rules:

"Response to direction is all-important in handling tests..." (***Rules,*** p. 55.)

And:

'Faults or justification for penalties include … not taking the line originally given by the handler: and, not continuing on that line for a considerable distance... ' (***Rules,*** p. 55.)

Judges are to have in mind the kind of performance they expect on a blind retrieve. A professional trainer indicated that there have been at least three kinds of "pictures" some Judges use when judging blind retrieves. The first such "picture" is a straight line from the handler to the blind plant. The jargon for this kind of performance without any stops along the way is 'lining the blind.' It calls for extra credit for a superior performance. Retrievers that run long and straight lines are a joy to train, handle and behold! Judges with this "picture" in mind want to see the dogs stay close to an imaginary line to the blind; They are not whistle counters and want to see a pretty "damned straight" path taken on the blind. Barring that, do not expect to be on their callback list.

The second "picture" is more like railroad tracks running from the line to the blind, or, parallel lines inside which the dog should run. This method of judging the blind assesses whether the dog stayed within a hypothetical corridor, wider than real railroad tracks, and did not wander too far from a direct line to the blind.

The third "picture" is like an imaginary cone where the smaller end of the cone is near to the start line and widens as the dog approaches the blind plant. In all of these "pictures," and others, the Judge wants to see the dogs running from the start on a direct line to the bird plant and handled well when they stray from the direct line.

A dog that leaves the line slightly off a direct line to the blind has shown a grasp of what it has been commanded to do with some precision but does it rather less than perfect. This kind of initial line is usually not harshly penalized if at all. When, however, a dog leaves the line at, say, a 45 degree angle off the start line, it has taken a poor initial line. Why would this happen given all the time that is given to direct the dog while it is beside the handler? Retrievers, although well trained and handled, are not machines.

Suppose, for example, that there is a double land blind. The shorter one is about 30 yards from the start line and a bird planter is sitting there. The longer blind is on a line to the same side of the chair as the shorter blind. Handlers are to challenge the longer blind and a dog that takes the opposite side of the chair

from where the short blind was planted has not challenged it. Why is that? It is because dogs that take the initial line for the longer blind on the same side of the chair and downwind from the shorter plant and go wide of the intended line must handle toward the shorter station. This creates a problem for those dogs and handlers. Dogs that take the wrong side of the chair do not face this handling issue and simply have not challenged the blind and have run a poor initial line.

Poor initial lines, when repeated on subsequent blinds like water blinds, may be the result of insufficient training or handler error or both. A poor initial line can be considered as disobedience to instructions given by the handler. In one observed instance, an amateur handler was not the owner of the dog. When sent, it ran into the gallery and sat before its owner which it had seen there. The rules permit elimination when a dog does not obey its handler. (***Rules,*** p. 37.) Some dogs, after a poor start, may perform sufficiently well to be called back for further testing. Nevertheless, the wide start should be compared carefully to the other dogs in the test.

There is a factor about initial lines often experienced by handlers and it is this. When a dog comes to the line and sits, it initially may fix its eyes on something in its field of vision that is not near the line to the blind plant. It proves difficult to correct where they are looking. After adjusting the dog so that it looks in the desired direction and when it is sent, it goes instead toward that area where it first locked its gaze. That first off line look is like a magnetic draw to some dogs. Some handlers, when experiencing this phenomenon, decide that on blinds they will approach the line in a straight manner so that the dog's first look is directed toward the initial line. This sometimes is not possible. The area around the start line is sometimes too crowded. Aside from the Judges, a bird hanger and bird boy, and perhaps a marshal, there are chairs, coolers, boxes, four wheelers, and often too many people there. This could easily be avoided and a path from behind the line directly to it provided for handlers who wish to approach the line head on. Placing a holding blind just behind the line would be a good start thereby negating a circuitous approach to the line.

Initial lines are important. Reading the rules which apply to them exemplifies that. It is a responsibility of the Judges to determine how much penalty to assess because of individual faults and their repetition. A poor initial line may be *'a failing or a habitual tendency resulting in a performance that is less than a "finished" job and is not pleasing to the eye.'* (***Rules,*** p. 49.)

Do not forget to review those initial lines. They can make a difference in the overall scheme of things. There is ample support in the rules for imposing moderate or major penalties for poor initial lines and for giving credit for superior performances on them as well. Judges should give careful consideration to initial lines and penalties resulting therefrom. Their deliberations, discussions and decisions could result, in some instances, in agreement to modify callbacks or placements. ■

[1] A euphemism. *'Damned straight'* suggests the truth has been uttered.

[2] The Rules mentioned in this essay were taken from: Field Trial Rules and Procedure for Retrievers, Amended to November 2017, Published by The American Kennel Club.

[3] The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language, Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1978, p. 548, usage No. 5.