

Hunt Test Common Mistakes

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After James Keldsen, Lakeville Indiana, printed in "Retrievers Online" Sept-Oct 2004

Condensation by Anne and Bob Everett

We hunt test enthusiasts seem to have to make the same mistakes and have them pointed out to us before we recognize them. So, here is an article from "Retrievers Online" (retrieversonline.com) that will point these mistakes out to you, hopefully, before you make them ☺. We are taking the liberty of condensing the article but you may read it in its full form in the Sept-Oct 2004 issue of "Retrievers Online". We have put James Keldsen's words in quotes. Those words not in quotes are our own opinions. Good luck in your training!

James Keldsen ends his summary with these words of wisdom that we will move to the front:

"Let's face it: hunt tests are not simply about picking up the birds. When actually hunting, the bottom line is to pick up every bird and the degree of polish on the performance is secondary. If the dogs retrieve all the birds while hunting, we can ignore slipped whistles, poor lines, and unsteadiness. This is not so at hunting tests. Judges model hunt tests after typical hunting scenarios, but that is where the similarities end. It is a game where we try to show two judges that our dogs have skills above and beyond those of the average meat dog on the public marshes. Hunt tests are an opportunity to demonstrate to others that dog and handler function as a team in a manner that epitomizes the hunting retriever. Run the test accordingly."

Now James Keldsen goes on to outline the mistakes we all make or have made.

Not Hearing the Judges' Instructions

Bottom line is you need to be there at the beginning of the test. When you cannot, due to running a dog in another stake, ask the marshal or an experienced participant, then ask the judges when you are in the last holding blind. The more people you ask, the more likely you are to get something similar to what was actually spoken. Perhaps it will make the difference of a pass or a failure.

Rushing the Dog to the Line

A mad dash to the line, to avoid holding up the test, is suicide for most dogs and their handlers. If the situation happens, however, at least take time to calm yourself down, to avoid your dog catching on to your agitated state of mind. Remember that the blood flow to the brain is decreased when you are in a panicked state.

Rushing on the Line

Take time to get comfortable. Allow the dog time. "The rules state that you cannot point out the gun stations but you can allow the dog to look out into the field on its own. Heel the dog on a line that allows it to survey the field on approach, sit it, look into the field to

review the stations yourself, make certain the dog is looking in the correct area of the field, take a deep breath, then signal for the birds.”

Not using the Line to Advantage

“At many tests, the handler has a wide area available at the line to place his dog.” Pick one that gives the best-unobstructed view for the dog. “Be at the test for the judges’ instructions and ask to view the test from the line after the test dog has run. Most judges will be happy to allow this. Go to the line get down on your knees and look over the test from the dog’s point of view.”

Running the Diversion Bird as a Mark

“The diversion bird is not a mark.” Also, the CKC rules effective January 1, 2005, state on page 36, for Senior Hunt Tests, “The diversion bird is not a mark....” Also note the rules for Master have changed to allow a diversion bird to be thrown on the way to or from a blind, as well as returning from a mark. Bottom line, check your rulebook before training for the test to ensure you are training for the test correctly.

James Keldsen states, “I cringe every time I watch a handler allow his dog to run past the diversion and stand there as the dog hunts all over for it. A diversion does not affect the marking category.”

Losing Control While Handling

“Handling ... is an exercise in control. If handling on a mark, the judges already know that your dog blew the mark, now you can only show that you can handle all the way back to the bird. Don’t allow the dog to hunt on its own after giving a cast or blowing the whistle. It is not unusual to see handlers that never gain control of their dogs on blinds, but the dogs still manage to arrive downwind of the bird and retrieve it. The handler’s lack of control drops the dogs and it makes for confused and unhappy handlers at the end of the test.” Of course, the handler contributed tremendously to failing the test but often they don’t recognize their part in the failure. ‘Stumble on bird’ or ‘SOB’ is what the judge records as they check off ‘Failed’ on the sheet. SOB means the dog found the bird by hunting, not by handler control.

“The dog’s ability to hunt will be evaluated elsewhere, not in a situation that requires handling.”

“Handlers that spare the whistle...and allow their dogs to carry poor lines, avoid en route hazards and hunt are setting their dogs up for failure.”

“When it comes to blowing the whistle, blow it hard and long. A technique that works for me is to blow the whistle and not let up until I see a change in direction from my dog that tells me it is stopping. Some handlers blow it short and then wait [and pray] to see if their dog turns. That can, particularly in high winds or running water, lead to missed whistles or whistle refusals in the judges’ books.”

Not Challenging the Blind

“The point of a blind is to send the dog from the line with the dog taking the straightest possible line directly to the bird. If there is cover in between, the dog should go through it. If there is a point of land, the dog should cross it. If there is an old fall on the line, the dog should not break down. Get from the line to the bird, while maintaining a straight line and you have run a good blind. Avoid cover, deviate left or right of the line, or allow the dog to break down [hunt] and your score drops appreciably...if a hazard is on the line, take it.”

So, hunting and hunt tests are similar yet different games with different rules. Make sure you and your dog are playing by the right set of rules when you play a game.