

Judging Hunt Tests, A Few Fine Points

by Executive Field Representative Tom Maneely

When judging any level of hunt tests, the judges should be looking for dogs that can demonstrate the qualities that make a good hunting dog. The Hunt Test program has been set up to provide handlers a place to show their good hunting dog and test them against well established standards. As judges, we can not forget that the Hunt Tests are just that, a place to prove that these dogs can hunt.



Trainability is an important trait of the hunting dog that we evaluate in all levels of hunt tests. In the Junior the dog needs to be under control. It should obey commands that would make it useful in the hunting field. A handler should be able to call the dog in and turn the dog to keep it hunting to the front and with the group. I would not expect a Junior dog to be able to be called off a flushed bird, but if he can be so much the better. One of the tricks in handling the Junior dog is to not give a command that you know the dog will not obey.

In the Senior level, the dog must also respond to these commands but it should be more responsive than the Junior level dogs. The Senior level dog is also required to be steady to wing, but can break point at the shot. Many judges tend to watch the bird as it leaves and do not really see if the dog is steady until the shot. It is human nature to follow the bird, but good judges have trained themselves to watch the dog they are judging and let the gunners worry about where the bird goes. The Senior dog is also required to back it's brace mate, but can be commanded to do so. Here judges should be watching to see if the backing dog recognizes the pointing dog before he is commanded to back. If the backing dog does not acknowledge the pointing dog and is just commanded to stop then he is not really meeting the Senior test criteria. Yes, he is showing that he can obey a command but that is all. I would want to see the dog actually acknowledge the pointing dog, and would explain prior to the brace what it is I want to see.

The rule book states that the Master dog should be a truly finished dog. Among other abilities, the Master dog is required to be steady to wing and shot. The rulebook also states that the dog should not be sent for a retrieve until it has positively demonstrated that it is steady to wing and shot. There is a great, sometimes overlooked, tool built into the Master Hunt Test that helps the judges in testing the steadiness of the dog being evaluated. The handler is required to shoulder a dummy / empty shotgun and follow the



flight of the bird as if they were going to shot the bird (just like you would while hunting). During the time that the handler is pointing the dummy gun, their attention is on the bird and not on the dog. If the dog is truly finished, and steady to wing and shot, it will remain steady without the help of its handler. This action aids the judge in determining the dog's steadiness.

The trainability section also talks about intimidation. A Master dog can not be intimidated into remaining steady, either while pointing or backing. Intimidation runs from mild to severe. Most intimidation is verbal, or in the form of body language / gestures. When judging the Master hunting dog, you should be aware of the different methods some trainers will use to keep their dogs steady. The rule book says that cautioning of a dog after it has established point is allowable but that the caution should be quiet and infrequent.

Another important trait of a hunting dog is endurance. As a practical matter hunt tests can not afford the time to hunt a dog for hours, however it is important that the dogs be judged for the entire specified time. In the Junior level the time is 15 minutes and in the Senior and Master levels it is 30 minutes. The dogs should be allowed to hunt freely until that time is reached. As a judge, we need to be sure that we are judging the dogs for the required time limits. You might have to spend extra time in a bird field, or circle around on course, but the time limit must be adhered to. A test hosting club should do it's best to see that there is enough course for the dogs to be evaluated for the required times. All levels of hunting dogs need to have the ability to hunt for these minimum time limits to be a useful hunting dog. Any less would cheapen the title and is not a true test of the dogs usefulness as a hunting companion.

Judging hunting dog tests can be very enjoyable but it comes with a large degree of responsibility. When a judge gives a dog a passing score they are saying that this dog has met the requirements of the level they were entered in and are worthy of earning that level title. Judging requires a good understanding of the rulebook and a good dose of common sense to interrupt the performances they observe.

