JUDGING BLINDS

Introduction: During the last seven years or so, I first entered into the Judges training scheme and started my apprenticeship working through the different levels of competition, eventually being accessed for the highest standard at Championship level, whilst my thirst grew to better my judging technique. Most of my training has been through mentorship, asking questions, watching other judges and observing. I was fortunate at the time to be a judge in Victoria and would regularly judge fields of 25 All Age handlers. To say I was tested would be an understatement.

When you start judging at the lower levels of competition you start scratching the surface of this enormous subject and although you have a comprehensive rulebook to guide you this is clearly open for interpretation. I really wanted to get this right, even more so in the complex senior level concepts which require a great deal of diligence by the judge in both challenges, timings of the complexities built into a run and what you're testing for on that particular leg.

During my Australian Retriever Trialling, I have received a lot of information from overseas judges; I have put my thoughts to paper on one of these subjects **"How to judge a blind"**. My thoughts are not totally my own, I have received lots of advice from many Australian judges, I have plagiarized a document I received from a good friend in the States on this vast subject and would like to share; offering something that could be used when starting out on your judging journey as you have that aspiration to be elevated, because on paper we have very little information about this subject. I, like many judges never want to make things personal but I do want to get it right when judging to ensure that competitors running under me feel they have been given a fair go, most importantly that they are and will be judged the same as every other competitor.

Judges know that they should judge each dog for the abilities it has acquired through training; these include steadiness, control, response to direction, and delivery. We should realise however, that the judge's experience (or lack thereof) in judging and training a gundog, that this could impair on his or her ability to gauge this criteria. Sometimes inexperience, or a limited

understanding of the factors involved can cloud the judge's perception of a dog's compliancy to commands which can be created by several factors, conditions on the day, environmental, weather, wind or a distraction i.e. vehicles driving through the area, unfamiliar noises (e.g. motorbikes, farm animals, stewards moving in the hides etc.) that a dog may or may not respond to. Or is the dog being disobedient? A call you must take into consideration and make on the day, in that moment.

Despite numerous judging training days around the country, in which many individuals have discussed appropriate ways to judge, there still seems to be a variety of interpretation, perhaps due, in part, to the tendency of some judges to rely more heavily on their personal experience than on a consistent and *objective standard*. Without any malice intended if we can receive further guidance from a document on exactly what to do then surely this is a good thing? We will raise the standard and have more consistency across the country; most importantly Competitors will feel a lot more comfortable that their dog's performance is being judged by a measurable standard!

How do we do this: The following is suggested criteria, which is a tried and tested method. That is proven and could be used simply by applying and developing your run setting of blinds.

Blind Criteria: When setting a blind your starting criteria as a judge is for a dog to demonstrate an ability to take and hold a line for a considerable distance in the direction of the blind, when asked to handle, the competitor should be able to do so concisely.

How do we do this? Add an imaginary line or barrier.

Note: Please refer to the diagram below before you read any further so you understand.

Add an imaginary horizontal line (Barrier) that the dog should cross over on its way to the blind if it is holding a good line. Somewhere between the firing point and the blind at a distance that you think is appropriate, **"You"** the judge would visualize an imaginary horizontal line between two points.
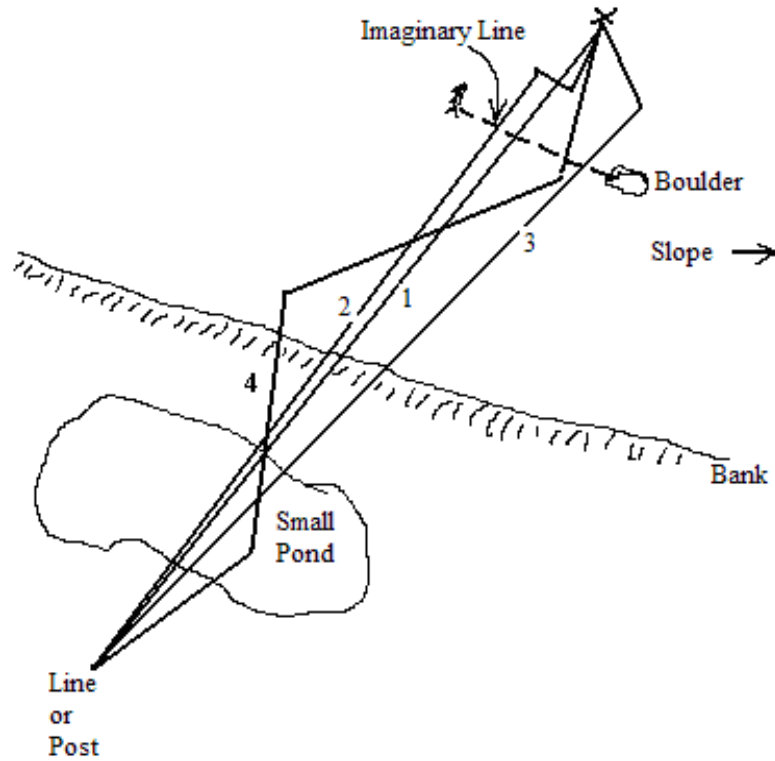
A dog, when sent, takes an initial line in the direction of the blind (This is always the most direct route to the blind) and holds that line, passing across your imaginary line/barrier on its way to the blind, handling concisely when asked to do so. This constitutes a very good score.

From my discussions with other judges and in their view, a deduction or different score in points for a dog that lined the blind and one that passed through the imaginary barrier (line), then handled concisely to the blind is very close. Why is this, because you have demonstrated, teamwork, ability to hold a long initial line from the FP and shown control as per our rules.

This of course is open to debate. Many people feel if a dog lines the blind then it has taken the initial handling direction and held it all the way regardless of obstacles. As soon as a dog needs to be handled, then it has ceased following that initial direction, so even if it handles very well it shouldn't score as high as the dog that did not need further help. If you use this method of run setting blinds and you have worked hard as a judge to find a great blind, its highly unlikely that a dog will line a blind because of the natural pathway obstacles placed in the dogs way when sent from the FP.

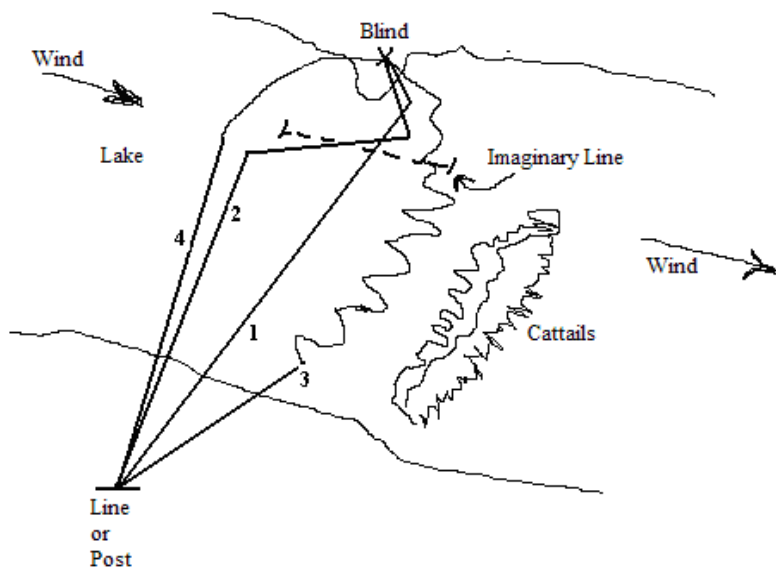The following are a couple of examples: **Land Blind and Water Blind**

Land Blind

Here are four examples:

1 – Lined the blind – 10
2 – Passed through the imaginary line and handled concisely – 9.5
3 – Handled concisely at the end of the blind – 8
4 – Handled concisely but did not carry the line – 6

A Water Blind:

Here are four different completions. The judge has placed the stakes to provide visual reference to the imaginary line.

   1 – Dog broke the barrier and handled concisely – 10
   2 – Dog demonstrated he could take a line and hold it for a considerable distance, but had to be cast through the barrier. Handled concisely with one or two whistles – 8.5
   3 – Got off line, many handles to keep out of reeds but got the blind. Low score 3
   4 – Lined the blind, from an indirect route, curled in on the wind at the end, did not break imaginary barrier – 7.5

What is crucial here is with these examples (though you may not agree with the values used), you now have the key to measuring success by clear and easily measurable results. Substitute your own numbers - or don't use a numbering system at all - but it is important to have objective standards by which to judge a blind precisely and fairly.

Even if you do not subscribe to the idea of the imaginary line or goal post, you must adhere to the two essential criterions laid down.
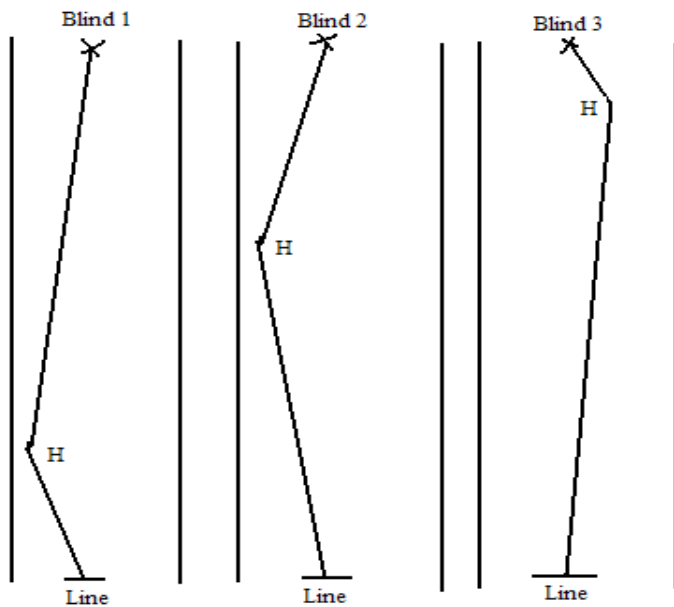
 Again, the important elements in your decision-making are:

   1. A dog must demonstrate the ability to take a line in the direction of the blind
        and hold that line for a considerable distance.

   2. The dog, when asked to handle, can do so concisely.

To attempt to interpretate the above correctly as a standard for judging blinds. The suggested "Rule format as a universal standard", perhaps on the grounds that this particular process of judging a blind is as subjective as any other tried or tested.
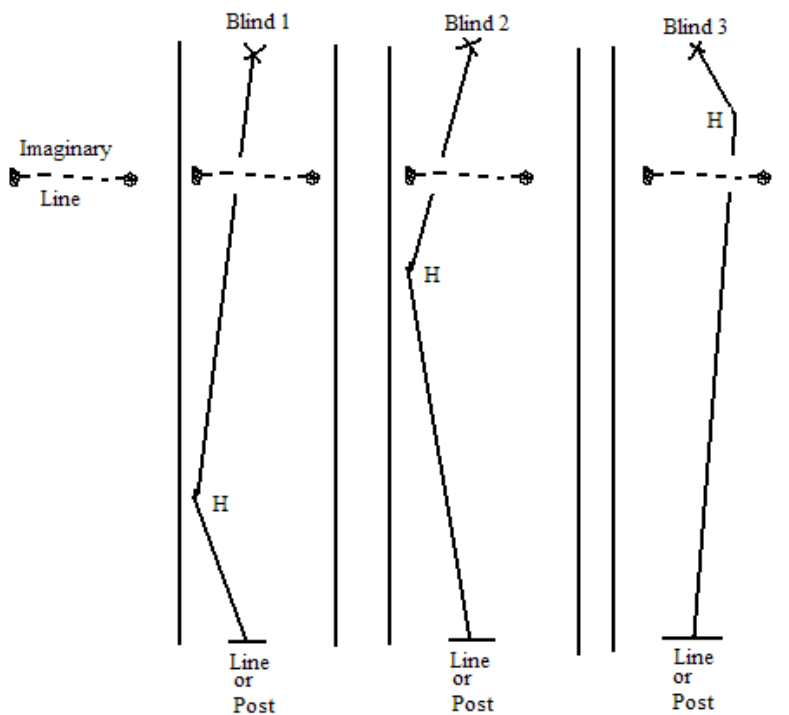
Many judges today have their own ideas about what constitutes a good performance and do not want to operate under the constraints of a set standard. Some think, for example, that a dog should stay right on line, or go through cover or brush that may or may not be on line, and do not take into consideration the number of whistles needed, or even the control demonstrated by the dog. Simply to keep a dog on line, with whistle after whistle, is not an impressive performance. This then becomes a painful experience and unpleasant to watch.

The following is an example of what could occur with the dog's line when sent from the firing point! How do you interpret this?

Blind 1   Blind 2   Blind 3

X   X   X

                                  H

                 H

H

Line   Line   Line

Question - What are the differences between these three blinds?

Once you insert the missing element in the above illustration, the "imaginary barrier (line) " as per the diagram below; once this is included, everything becomes clear, it is far easier to focus on the essentials of a dog's performance and objectively evaluate it.

Blind 1   Blind 2   Blind 3

X   X   X

                                  H

Imaginary
▷— — —◁ ▷— — — ◁ ▷— — — ◁ ▷— — —◁
Line

                 H

H

Line   Line   Line
or   or   or
Post   Post   Post

Blind 1 is a good job. It is clearly not a failure, though the handler and dog got into very early trouble. They lost their opportunity on this blind to demonstrate taking a line on the initial cast and hold the line a considerable distance. However, they recovered very nicely, one whistle angle back. Score 7

Blind 2 was off line, but demonstrated he could take a line and hold it. When asked to handle, he did so concisely, one angle back, got the blind. They fell short, dog and handler, of driving through the imaginary barrier. Good Job. Score 8.5

(In an actual trial, this could be the best job. When measuring success against results, you probably would re-evaluate to a 9)

Blind 3 is perfect depending on your interpretation. The dog took a line, held the line in the direction of the blind, passed through the imaginary barrier, handled concisely with one whistle, and got the blind. Score 9.5

Note: If another contestant lined the blind from the FP, then you could award full points depending on how you judge.

However! Please read in conjunction of the Retrieving Trial rules Para 28, a blind find retrieve is a test of control!

Conclusion: These examples help us understand how to apply the criteria formulated by using a tried and proven method, consequently, making it easier for judges to objectively evaluate a blind. If a judge has good grounds and terrain to set up their blind, these instructions are simple, straightforward, and workable. At the very least, they are worthy of consideration and discussion.

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