

Considerations for run setting in Retriever Trials

Introduction:

In a technical sport that requires a degree of deliberate interpretation as to what has just occurred when a sporting dog is competing, how do you (**the judge**) set a run for a dog to be judged with an “*ambit of equality, where assessment is fairly made*” for that competition?

As a judge it helps if you have developed a good level of ground and environmental awareness, be extremely cognizant of the weather or how changing weather conditions could affect what you envisage will happen, then balance that with the capabilities of a trained dog on how well that particular run will be challenged and completed to make a fair competition.

There are several things that you can do before a dog steps up with the handler to the firing point (FP).

Here are some of my thoughts that I would like to share with any aspirant judge on their way up through the judging training system.

Run Setting:

Try to develop your run setting using all the criteria contained in ***Rules for the Conduct of Retrieving Trials for Gundogs, (Para 1-4)*** to showcase what a well trained dog can do.

Come to the trial with an open mind; do not get locked into a training test, use all the terrain and natural obstacles available to you.

It's easy to trick a dog, set up good tests without tricks. If you want to see good dog work presented by a well-trained dog then present a doable challenging intelligent test.

Liaison:

Good communication with the club / trial manager is essential; you can gain volumes of information from both the secretary and trial manager, this should occur from the moment you sign your contract. Gauge the feel of the ground, land, water etc., and how many competitors you are likely to have. This has several benefits before you even arrive at the trial site in particular for the logistics, possible limitations and other stakes encroaching on your allocated area, this may help you gather some general ideas for your competition, the follow on will be to develop your run's incorporating timings to make it work. Make an effort to speak to the other judges so that problems reference run encroachment can be ironed out.

Reconnaissance:

If you have time and the trial manager can oblige you, you may be able to visit the trial site on a weekend before the competition, if not try to arrive 24 hours in advance allowing plenty of time to scope your allocated area. Make sure you see the whole area allocated before you pick your runs and work out the logistics of moving from one run to the next e.g. two runs may be run using virtually the same FP etc.

Start developing your runs with the logistics required for competitors, vehicles, dogs and gallery, competitors moving from stake to stake etc. This is where you start fine-tuning your run to determine how long it will take to complete each run.

Clarify with the trial manager “what game you are using?” Is it all the same size and colour? Where will the other stakes be held? Do I have competitors moving between stakes? Communication and planning is the key.

Practical awareness:

It can be beneficial to inspect all the birds', selecting the same size and colour for a certain leg of a triple mark as this could affect the flight and placement of the bird. Sometimes options are limited.

Examples:

If you have tight double or triple mark you need be aware that you may accidentally present an illegal run including the situation where the wind changes due to the fluctuations in flight path. Odd sizes and colours on a blind using the same species of game throughout that leg of the run is common usage. However, a duck is not just a duck; there is a huge difference between a mountain duck or teal, both in size and smell.

Marks:

On marked retrieves, a dog should be able to see each bird in the air as well as the fall. Exceptions can still work, but should be avoided – if possible. A mottled bird would need to break the skyline and be clearly seen above the background at least before it travels through background cover. A light bird may be difficult to see as it travels through a grey skyline but must be clearly seen as it descends through the background cover.

The basic elements of marking are direction, depth, and area.

The throwers should be stationed inconspicuous to the competing dog; this includes keeping the steward out of sight too. Use natural camouflage to hide the steward and thrower, trees, long grass, gully or creek line. Effective remote systems can be quite beneficial.

When you have well placed marks, they do not have to be tight or long.

Setup marks that will test intelligence, the ability to navigate, negotiate terrain, recognize depth, identify the fall area once reached, and if required hunting ability.

Dogs which disturb cover unnecessarily, clearly well out of the area of the fall, either by not going directly to that area, or by leaving it, even though they eventually find the bird without being handled, should be penalised more severely than those handled quickly and obediently to it.

When setting up a triple give very serious consideration to making the last bird down the "Go To". This allows you as judge the chance to test at least one mark being attacked with vigor, hopefully avoiding handling while still allowing plenty of scope for memory.

To some extent with difficult double marks that include a blind – offering a last down "Go To" mark can offer an array of judging positives. You get to see an honest attempt at a difficult mark, control and finally memory.

Factors that will affect Marking: Wind has a considerable influence on a dogs' marking ability. Be mindful of the wind direction. Ideally the mark should land downwind of the dog or if this is not possible then across wind so that the dog must mark the area of the fall and not simply follow its nose. Terrain also has a large influence but a well-trained dog will or should be able to tackle the terrain that you present. Do not present dangerous ground e.g., cliff faces or something a dog can jump and injure itself.

Whatever level you are setting "marks" be it novice through to all age, as stated above if you use the terrain correctly you can normally present to the dog very good marks that will allow a dog to be fully tested, using all our judging criteria available. You must be fair and present a sighted test if you want to see a dog mark well.

Make sure you, as a judge, can see the fall of the bird and watch the dog pick up the mark. Position yourself accordingly.

Do not be particularly harsh on a dog taking a slight curving line to the fall using a cross breeze. It is a natural trait for working gundogs to make best use of breeze.

Blinds:

Wherever possible, judges should plan their tests in such a way that they take advantage of natural obstacles, these include different terrain points, spits of land, creek line, hedges, small bushes, adjacent heavy cover, undulations, and rolling terrain. Despite such natural distractions, it should be possible, at least in theory, for a dog to find a well-planned blind retrieve on the initial line from the handler; that the dog will do so is highly improbable because of those natural hazards, so the dog must be handled to the blind. Nevertheless, the test should be so planned so the dog should be in-sight continuously.

Unfortunately in some localities light dips, drains, shrubbery etc., may have the dogs out of site for a few seconds. The terrain should still allow capacity for visual corrections quite quickly.

In other words, setup a good blind so you do not have to draw a road map on how to get there.

The only direction competitors need if required is getting the item of game by the shortest or most direct route.

HELPFUL HINTS:

Avoid the training test blind, where you pick up a blind at the base of a single tree, having gone through/under the arc of the mark or ran the corridor between two marks. Decide how you will challenge both handler and dog on your blind run, whilst taking advantage of using all the natural terrain in front of the dog and handler at the FP. Be fair, you must consider the fast dog, the slow dog, the in-between dog where you identify your potential choke points. You can make a conscious decision on how many handles a dog may need to stay on line at a given area. Give a handler the opportunity to keep the dog on line.

Note: *Choke points are areas that could possibly redirect a dog onto a different line; this is created along the direct blind route by using the natural obstacles available to you that a dog could face on a duck shoot.*

When you have a good blind, you do not need poison birds. Allow yourself the time to plan properly.

- Think about the wind, the dog should not simply follow its nose to the blind
- Consider the terrain; is there a corridor that you can see your dog the majority of the time that presents natural obstacle challenges on route to the blind.
- Can the handler see the dog for virtually the whole line? They must be able to control their dog.
- Is there scent from a mark or previous pick up that will affect the line?
- Can a dog track the blind by using drag back scent!
- Can the dog see the handler clearly when it turns around – sun, background.
- Are there too many barriers?
- Envisage or look at the blind through the dog's eye, even better where possible put a trained dog over your blind and observe everything it does and how they react to your choke points.
- Look at your blind from both the firing point to the blind and the reverse so you see what the dog will see if it turns around to look at the handler.
- Always, always walk your blind and look at the ground for any danger to the dog. (Old barbed wire, covered holes, half buried star pickets etc.)

Be aware of putting on a blind where the dog is out of sight for a considerable period of time running multiple retrieves. If you want to be fair, you must be fair to the handlers, develop a challenging test that gives them windows of opportunity to correct a dog and get them back on line. If distance, proximity makes the task challenging have you allowed 'clear vision' corridors for handlers to make corrections if 'swaps' appear imminent.

If possible each blind should have a beginning, middle and end. You can break your blind down into different stages and develop your scoring system for each section. What is your corridor - the width of ground that you expect a dog on line to stay within, and what is your window of opportunity for the handler to get the dog back on line? What is your expectation for a good initial line when the handler cues the dog and sends? Whatever system you use, you must have one and ideally be able to judge each dog the same. Be cognizant of different styles of

dogs, the way they hunt and handle. Please remember your choke points where you are likely to lose a dog and how many commands you will allow the handler at that point to keep the dog on line.

Contingency: Another area to consider in this type of test, the **“What if?”** What if a dog does something that’s not in the rules, what if a dog hooks around and picks up a bird from another area and drags that back through the area of the blind, or the wind changes direction and the dogs can clearly smell a mark! This is a consideration you must be aware of when run setting multiple retrieves. Try where possible to develop your runs with built in contingencies that you can quickly change if affected environmentally.

- Pre Run: Apart from general comments about what a good run might look like – ‘DO NOT’ – set demands that dogs – ‘Doing this or that’ will be eliminated. One never knows with total certainty how runs will unfold. Best to let things run their course and then make decisions.

Summary: This is not a dictum on how to set your runs or how to judge. Please use it as required for extra guidance on possible considerations when setting a mark or developing a blind. You may have other ideas, and I offer this based on researched information, my own competing and judging experiences. I’m also cognizant there is not a great deal of information available amongst our archives on actual run setting when starting out on your judging journey. I hope that you can use, plagiarize shorten or expand some of the information I have suggested which will enable you to become a more rounded and mindful judge, placing the dogs’ interest first and foremost by presenting a challenging intelligent test in a fair and equitable way.

Yours in trialing,

Karl Britton