

Are you a subjective or an objective Judge?

Our Judging is delivered partially on our experiences which is normally described as subjective. This requires a great deal of professionalism and impartiality to act as an observer; and give a score based on everything that you have been taught, coupled with your training experiences, what a well-trained gundog can or could do, when presented with that challenge at whatever level of competition. Using a negative scoring system requires total concentration to be able to Judge both dog and handler objectively, trying to measure a performance using the criteria laid down in **Para 1 to 4. Purpose of a Retrieving Trial.**

So, if you are busy **only** counting commands, are you Judging? Making a mental assessment of what is occurring in front of you, I suggest not, you are being objective and not subjective. This is extremely important, why did that occur, what was the reason for a dog to do that or did something that you did not expect!

We know that the criteria of the **Purpose** in Para 1 of a Retrieving Trial; Quote: ***A Retrieving Trial is an event at which competitions for the working of registered Gundogs are conducted, both on land and in or through water, to determine their relative merits in the field under conditions which emulate as closely as possible those which would be found whilst hunting, but at the same time bring the work of each dog within an ambit of equality where assessment is fairly made.***

Where do you go as a Judge for this very broad deliberation when selecting your run and trying where possible to emulate as much content of the above *“Purpose of a Retrieving trial”*?

Eligibility and Responsibility of Judges is laid out in Para 51, sub paras a to f. Does this give sufficient guidance for the new Judge or the aspirant Judge who pass the criteria and qualifies for an upgrade by judging sufficient trials to be elevated at that level? Is this really the correct criteria which helps and prepares you with sufficient guidance to do further run development at the next level of competition. Complications that may occur at that level and how to deal with it? I do not believe it does.

Above mentioned, is based on our own trialling experience, training a dog and hunting, if we have had the privilege of doing so. What if you have limited experience, what if you have never been on a duck hunt? If you are lucky, you will get some guidance by mentors. Mostly we rely on our own mistakes as a Judge, sometimes to the detriment of the competitor. I would like to suggest we are indeed better than this and whilst we have a limited database on how to Judge, we do not always learn from our experiences. Time and time again I see serious flaws in our run setting, unfair criteria being applied and certainly not the same criteria applied to the run to give each competing team a fair crack to show what they can do. Sometimes there is so much variation in that run on the day, this not only becomes a chore to finish but you can't reflect good dog work, as a competing team you must do what you can to survive.

Why is this? I believe some people struggle with advice and guidance and have already made up their mind, I have openly heard Judges state to the competitors *“this is my run if*

you don't like it, you know what to do! This is not helpful to anyone, all Judges should not feel the need to threaten competitors but rather the opposite, we should be embracing them and helping the competitors in our understanding of what we are looking for in a run. We are all walking advocates for the sport we should have the confidence in our own ability to present our runs in such an explained fashion that there is no doubt to the competitor that they understand, it's not an attrition run at the start of the day to reduce the field. All competitors should feel comfortable in asking any questions for clarification no matter what level of competition this is. As a newbie it may be a very honest misunderstanding of what is required as many of the competitors do not digest the rules. It is most helpful simplifying your instructions, keeping them in a chronological sequence and uncomplicated.

I would like to suggest some helpful criteria of dos and don'ts that may help you on your Judging journey that you may or may not be struggling with. I also invite any active Judge to offer with any helpful criteria to aspirant Judges that may be helpful based on their own experiences.

I want to feel as a competitor that I really can see the rationale and relationship to a hunting style run, that the Judge of the day has given this run in their selection and criteria. When the weather has changed, when the wind is up or I run first thing in the morning on a dark cold day with frost on the ground using un-thawed birds, that the later competing teams are going to get the same or a similar style run, and they will not be advantaged or disadvantaged. I want to feel comfortable as a competitor, I want the same criteria if I run first or last in the evening when it's getting dark. If a competitor can see the long dark water blind early afternoon, I want the same advantage if I am running the last dog and the sun has gone down, so mark the blind if it can't be seen. I want to be fair.

I have an expectation as a Judge to treat everyone equally, take my time when run setting and make the competing team as comfortable as possible, with uncomplicated explanations in my instructions. No tricks, no relocations, no dark or light birds just the same, same, same... where humanly possible. Large open firing points, stand where you need to for the best advantage for you and your dog. I want to give everyone on that day when competing under me as much freedom as possible for them to demonstrate their dog and themselves as a hunting team that I can make an accurate and fair assessment on that run. If I have selected the run that week or day before and the logistics or weather has changed my expectations in my testing criteria, I will quickly and openly explain to competitors that I am going to make some changes on the run, please be patient it will be to your advantage. Strangely enough competitors get that, you are being helpful and flexible. I do not sit back on my laurels and wing it, if I can't be bothered to open the run up or move a thrower to present a bird better or change a run because of the wind. I have openly stated over the years dogs cannot ignore their noses when out of site of the handler! We are training retrievers to hunt, find and locate game, we can't tell them when to use their nose and when not to! I'm human, I also make mistakes and if I have done something that is clearly not working, I won't hesitate to stop the competition and reset the run, with the Trial Manager and competitors' permission.

I would like to give each competing team running under me the same criteria as much as possible, so they understand and don't feel grieved or disadvantaged and most importantly

my run is doable and works because I have tested it with a dog. Putting a competent dog at that level will open several areas which may not have been seen before. This again allows you to quickly make changes if required to ensure your run works.

So how can we create this and find latitude with built-in contingency in your run setting but staying within the rules of the sport whilst still presenting a challenging test at the correct level, you must have ***“balance in your run setting”***.

Here are some of my thoughts and ideas

Do you have Balance in your Run Setting?

I would like to offer some suggestions when presenting your runs in a stronger and more doable challenge when developing your run selection. This is extremely important to try and get right if you're a newbie Judge learning your craft. To the more seasoned Judge and competitor. First and foremost, as a judge you are an advocate for the sport, your representation, and actions in what you do can make all the difference to the days events, not just Judging the designed competition you have set, but much bigger than that, you're setting the tone for the weekend.

Fact! none of us are getting any younger, this is an amateur sport, we have an expectation as a competitor in treating everyone fairly, to give each competing team a fair go, with uncomplicated instructions and sequences. Some competitors travel for days from Interstate to compete, they don't want to go out on the first run because of something silly, feeling awful for the weekend, because it was situation that they could not control; But you the Judge could, you could have seen that the wind had changed that morning and it was going to affect that short bird on the right that the dog had to run by! I ask you this, is this fair or the best you can do by losing most of the field on the first run? Creating a situation where later handlers are coming up to the pegs not even letting their dogs have a crack at the long mark! Rather the opposite, the astute handler seeing what is happening and totally false lining the dog down the side! To avoid running past that short mark. Is this really your test? I'm sure we can do better than this, we must, and we must have the ability to think on our feet, quickly and swiftly make changes to make the run doable. I would suggest a more common-sense approach, what could have occurred was changing the pick-up order, this would have worked just as well. You would have still had two presented marks. Why? because in hunting you the handler select your own pick-up order, I as a shooter will attempt to pick up wounded game first, equally with a young dog, I may pick up a short bird first get it out of the way so I can totally concentrate on the longer more difficult bird.

Whatever I do when I am run setting, I try where possible to present my runs in a chronological sequence as it is presented most of the time in a shooting hunting scenario. Why? I simply want to Judge dog work and that connection between the handler and the dog. I'm trying where possible to present a run that's as realistic as possible to the shooting field with no tricks or gimmicks with a natural sequence of events as possible that whatever happens on that day, change of cloud cover, the sun, running early, running later in the day, you will receive the same setting, humanly as possible. I apply a lot of pragmatic sense in what I do, my runs are deliberate and sequential. I'm certainly not testing the handler's memory, without threatening or dictating, your dog must do this or that. Or giving

complicated instructions to remember. Without intimidation my instructions are clear. After all, if you were out shooting and fortunate enough to shoot several birds in a quick sequence, there is a very good chance you would pick up the later birds first or depending on your dog's ability the obvious wounded bird first. My point is you would select your own sequence. Or what you wanted to select first knowing your dog's capabilities and level of training and experience.

What you would not do, is keep relocating, shoot a long bird, then advance, shoot a short bird on the inside, then advance again and send your dog from a completely different site picture with the wind in the dog's face, trying to pick up the long bird first whilst running past the short one! We are looking for a dog to go as direct as possible with least disturbance to the ground.

So, as a Judge you are firmly in charge of that train set on the day and you are literally setting the tone for the weekend. Ask yourself, is there a better way of doing this on the day? The weather has now changed so I must change a few things, to be fair not only to the competing team running under you that day, but also the bigger picture which is for the good and benefit of the sport. We are trying to promote what we do and give value for money by presenting such a course to not only challenge the dog and handler at that level, but also bring the assessment made within ambit of equality.

This is some of my suggestions to help you when run setting and development in your competition course.

- Do all my runs relate to a shooting scenario, is this what could occur?
- From a dog's view, what can they see? Lie down on your stomach and look at what your dog can see!
- From both a dog's view when in the field working, can the dog see back to the handler, to take instructions if required?
- FP is this sufficiently large enough to allow that handler to move and handle their dog. If you were out shooting, you will move to help your dog, you will not keep calling your dog back if they could not be seen.
- Ask yourself, what is the aim? What am I trying to achieve, e.g., is it a marking test? An understanding of a certain concept? Memory birds and steadiness etc.
- Hides, use a natural hide as much as possible near the FP, get away from using a vehicle.
- Don't leave Stewards in an open field wearing bright coloured or white clothing with no communication to them so they keep standing up! It's an absolute awful distraction for any dog, camouflage the thrower and hide the Steward. Have radio communication if required.
- Keep movement to a minimum when dogs are running, certainly no moving Utes going across the run or distractions in the background of the handler.
- Don't do tricks, dogs don't do tricks, they don't understand, they don't get the game, especially ignoring their nose when out of sight to the handler. We are better than this.

- Dogs don't do well on relocations, the only time I will personally do a relocation is to let the handler go forward so they can see their dog, I try and keep it real. Happy to see a dog sent from where the bird is shot.
- Don't do gimmicks or unconventional, practice the basics and use these often. (Relate, what you are doing back to duck hunting) **good marks and great blinds.**
- **Do Judge** and do make a fair assessment of what occurred. Don't have your head inside your score sheet, (you will possibly miss something) looking down all the time, just doing a negative countdown of commands. That is not judging, that is not assessing what has just occurred at that moment in time! Consider all the factors and why, why did that dog fall off the hill? why did that dog react the way it did when it went into area of the fall? What affected that run and why? e.g. Did a previous dog drag back a duck through that area etc, **be subjective in Judging.**
- If you set a long water blind at midday, down a creek tunnel shaded with trees will it be the same blind when the Sun goes down late afternoon, if not consider marking the area, so it is obvious to the handler. It has got to be the same for everyone running on the day, whatever time they arrive at the pegs.
- When Judging Junior stakes, stick with rules, don't put on an extra steadiness test, in Novice when you don't need too. It's not different it's not smart! Have the confidence in your ability to set a run which thoroughly tests the dogs in all aspects of that level of competition.
- Novice: give them true sighted marks, let the terrain be their challenge. Square entry to water all the time. Do not set them up to fail, ever.
- Restricted: test your simple concepts lengthen your runs, confirm handling on simple un-complexed blinds. Keep concepts open as wide as possible. Do not present a challenge at that level, this is confusing.
- All Age: have the confidence in your ability to set runs that are doable for a well-trained all age dog who can complete. Present the challenge with a clear vision to the handler, what is required.
- My very best advice is not to be overzealous, *set great testing run that reflects what a well-trained dog could do and let the dogs score that run themselves.*
- Don't do gimmicks if you are going to show or test something give the dog a chance. e.g., If you are going to set a rabbit or bird drag, let the hunting team either see the item of game in front of them or in the air and let the dog watch it go away. Don't do a sight window of one metre of a fleeting rabbit at 70 metres and expect the dog to have seen that with one snapshot then hunt up that trail scent and tackle it as a scent drag/wounded rabbit! If the dog hasn't seen the item of game in the first place it doesn't really understand what has just happened, the dog effectively is doing a blind. If your test is to Judge a dog on finding wounded game, then present that test as such and let it see the wounded game limping away!
- Walk the line of your blinds, look for that slot, that window of escape a chance for the handler to keep their dog online and let the handler see the dog as much as possible into the area of the blind. Test of control, a dog out of site is deemed to be out of control.
- Marking test, is just that, let the marks be seen, let the dog follow the arc to ground, placing it across a large gum tree with an overcast sky at max distance on an awful day of grey contrast is just not going to work. My rule of thumb for a triple, shoot a short bird, 50 to 70 metres, shoot a medium to long, 90 to 110. Shoot the last bird

down as a go bird! My max distance on pigeon is 115 to 130, once collected, pick up medium bird and finally pick up the short memory bird last. Dogs struggle marking small pigeons at max distance be aware of this. There is a fine line to watch a dog marking, recognising the depth, compared to a hard charging lining dog that just goes out hard all the time and occasionally gets lucky by stepping on the bird! To the dog who “checks down” and stays in that area by its own mental assessment. If you observe carefully, you can judge this happening and watch the dog as they come into the area of the fall, start to slow down, switch to hunt, eyes and nose mode.

- If you do a lot of out of sight marks, dogs working out of sight to the handler, I suggest you move into an elevated position or a position of advantage. If you are stood directly behind the handler that cannot see their dog, there is a very good chance you can't see the dog either! So, you cannot Judge what you cannot observe, think about that!
- **Thoroughly test your run by putting a competent dog over it, this is so important, and I rarely see this happen at any level.** It's a must, you will uncover so much if you test your run with a none competing dog.
- Never be inconsiderate and not be bothered to change your run because several factors have come into play since you selected your test. Stay flexible stay calm, relax, ask for help, you don't have to do everything yourself.
- Stay humble, remember you are providing a service it is an immense privilege to Judge this sport, do just that, do it justice by doing the right thing by the competitors and dogs, don't allow your competition to become a survival contest or a lucky dip. We are looking for the best dog at that moment in time being thoroughly tested not one that's survived your course.

Eligibility and responsibilities as Judges do not stop just because you have now been deemed competent to hold a Judges licence. You must learn your craft and just like a dog trainer you must strive to improve in all areas continually. Remember you have a phenomenal responsibility to the Sport, the Club who contracted you, the Competitors who have paid good money, sometimes thousands of dollars to travel that week/weekend, please be mindful, please be considerate and know your duty. You are to Judge and advocate the sport, it's not personal so don't make it personal; by trying to do something that is not within the spirit of the competition and look for something that does not exist in the rules.

Your thorough interpolation, coupled with accurate decision making is paramount. Clearly defined challenges, clear vision and reasonable opportunities for handlers to enforce adjustments. Surely this is not beyond the capacity of most Judges.

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