



## Judging Interpretation Topics

The NAHRA Board of Directors recently issued a survey of all NAHRA members. The results of the survey indicated there was need to clarify or interpret some areas of judgement related to retriever's performance during Licensed Field Tests. Because the NAHRA Rule Book considers judging an art not a science some things are not always specifically written down. Five topics were selected and sent to 15 experienced NAHRA judges. Their input is very much appreciated. The topic being discussed are Bird Handling, Honor, Noise, Steadiness, and Switching. The discussions will be issued to all Judging Clinic Presenters, all Judges and all Members.

Hunting Retrievers are tested for their suitability as a hunting companion. As such, their function is to add to the efficiency and the enjoyment of a day's hunt in the field or in the marsh. The NAHRA testing program tests the natural abilities and the trained abilities or skills necessary to fulfill the hunter's needs. For this discussion references will generally be made towards a finished retriever. For NAHRA that is a Master Hunting Retriever. The topics discussed will apply to all categories with the exception of to Honor. The efficiency of skill level increases as the category moves from Started to Hunter, from Hunter to Intermediate and from Intermediate to Senior.

So, let's describe what is required by a hunting retriever. They are to follow their handler's direction. Walk tractably at heel. Sit or stay when commanded and wait quietly without movement until released. Locate and retrieve all birds that their handler sent them for. Deliver that bird, fit for the table to their handler. Then await further orders.

From the rule book Judging Guidelines, Hunting Skills: "At the risk of over-simplification, the primary purpose of a hunting retriever is to get birds to hand as quickly as possible in a pleasing, obedient manner and all faults or infractions are a result of deviation from this.

## Bird Handling

What do we expect of a hunting retriever while it is making a retrieve? A retrieve consists of multiple parts. The dog must locate the fallen bird, pick it up, return, and deliver to its handler. For the sake of this discussion on bird handling it will pertain to the pickup, the return and the delivery. Thank you to our judges' panel of Dwight Dial, Dave Mellender, and Tom Johnston.

There is a common phrase in the rule book for all categories. It is "The dog shall return to the handler without delay." The Hunter, the Intermediate, and the Senior categories also say, "A dog must deliver all birds to hand." The Started category does not require delivery to hand but says, "However, the dog must deliver the bird within a reasonable radius of the point of origin which is easily accessible to the handler."

We asked, "What is expected; what is acceptable? What are your thoughts on stickiness, freezing, dropping to ground, rough/shaking; what is penalized and what would cause elimination?"

**Dwight** quoted from the Regulations Ch II, Sec 1:

Par.11 "Incidents of intentional hard-mouth resulting, in the opinion of the judges, in a bird unfit for the table is grounds for failing a test. The dog should pick up a bird tenderly but firmly and without delay. (A dog will be eliminated for hard-mouth or badly damaging game, but before doing so, both judges should inspect the bird and be satisfied that the dog alone was responsible for the damage.)

Par. 12 "A dog unwilling to release a bird (Sticking" or "Freezing") will be marked down. Repeated evidence is grounds for elimination.

**Dave said "Dropping birds prior to delivery is not part of a finished dog's skillset. I don't think we can set an arbitrary number. Is the dog playing with it or re-adjusting it or is the bird at the end of its use cycle?"**

**Dwight stated that "The dog should be marked down for all incidents of sticking, dropping, or shaking a bird."**

**Tom added "Judging Bird Handling and delivery for me is guided by two core Rulebook concepts: 1) the dog must return without delay, and 2) the bird must be fit for the table."**

**"Return without Delay for me this is about judging the intent of the dog, not its speed, not its return route,.....There are many excusable factors that may cause a dog to drop a bird (re-grip from soft mouth, wiggling shot flyer, hot weather, loose feathered or skanky bird): the key is how fast they pick it back up again and complete the retrieve. A dog that puts a bird on the ground, but then regrips and quickly finishes is not even a minor deduction. However, if ..the dog is delaying the retrieve by any means (slow return, unduly long return path, or multiple**

**drops) for any reason a major deduction is in order. And repeated evidence..." Could lead to elimination. "It can ruin a hunt, flair birds, interfere with safe shooting and unduly waste time outside the blind, all of which annoys the hunters."**

**Tom went on with "Fit for the Table for me is more clear than most judging criterion; if the dog renders the bird unfit for the table the dog is eliminated. Of course there need to be no doubt that the damage was caused by the dog. Wingers and Zingers can cause damage to a bird that looks like hard mouthed. So be sure and inspect the birds immediately after delivery."**

**Dwight listed numbers of incidents which could be grounds for elimination if there are no extenuating circumstances.**

**"Did dropping the bird delay the dogs return? If a Started dog on all 5 birds, a Hunter dog on 3 birds, an Intermediate on 2 birds or a Senior on 2 birds could be grounds for elimination. Extenuating circumstances – drooping the bird due to bees, wasps, hornets, injury, difficult terrain, etc. Also Started at the line – OK on all birds if handler can take two steps and pick up the bird.**

**Rough/Shaking (resulting in no damage to bird) – Started 2 incidents, Hunter, Intermediate, Senior 1 incident.**

**Sticking (resulting in no damage to bird) – Started 3 incidents, Hunter 3 incidents, Intermediate 3 incidents, Senior 2 incidents. "**

**Tom added, "Sticking, freezing and head stretching to avoid delivery are far a more common problem than traditional hardmouthed, and have a much broader spectrum of presentation. If the dog is avoiding the delivery it is faulted under the Return without Delay clause, and in the extreme or if repeated, should be cause for elimination.**

**From the Judging Guidelines "Under the NAHRA concept, the objective is to recover the bird as quickly and efficiently as possible, to create the least amount of disturbance in the marsh and upland and to give the hunter the maximum amount of time to actually take game."**

## To Honor

To honor another dog's work is the ultimate demonstration of a finished retriever. NAHRA does not require an honor within any of the categories of testing. However, a judge does have the prerogative to include an honor in the testing at the Senior category. There are several ways this can be accomplished.

In order to successfully complete an honor, a fallen bird has to be presented to the working dog as the honor dog is in a position to observe. The honor dog is to remain steady and as such is not to interfere with the working dog. If it does interfere it is to be eliminated.

Let's get some input from a couple of judges, namely John Guidice and Paul Pommerening.

We asked our panel, what does it mean to honor?

**Paul stated, "I feel that an honor means that the honoring dog is in a position and distance (at least 2 dog lengths) from the working dog to show that they are under control and understand that they are remaining still and composed as the working dog performs their retrieve."**

**John added, "The typical honor setup in a marking series involves a working dog and honor dog separated by a 'reasonable' distance that minimizes the chance of a dogfight but allows both dogs to see all the marks."**

We also asked about aspects of a proper honor (where are dogs positioned, explain sequence, when excused)?

**John replied, in a marking series "sequence of events will have the honor dog and their handler in their assigned position (off lead). The working dog will then be called to the line. .... Once both dogs and handlers are set (I usually have the handlers signal) and the test begins, then the marks proceed as usual except that you now must watch the line manners of 2 dogs..... The honor dog is typically excused after the working dog has left for the first retrieve and is far enough from the line that movement or commands from the honor handler shouldn't interfere with the working dog."**

**Paul stated, "I would expect to set up an honor where both dogs are allowed to come to the point of origin separately. The honor dog has already performed the test and is probably at the point of origin and is moved over to the honor position. The working dog comes to the line. The dogs are allowed to settle into their position. The sequence of the series is performed. The working dog is released, leaves the point of origin and is committed to the retrieve of the first mark. The honoring dog is then excused."**

We asked about creeping & noise? We also asked what would be considered interference.

**Paul said, “Creeping and noise is really a subjective quality. Did the honoring dog move their front feet or are they out two body lengths? Is it a small whine or unabashed howling? I feel the standard is pretty tight here in that a body length of movement or enough noise to make the working dog take notice is cause for penalty. If the honoring dog attempts to retrieve, if the handler cannot keep the honoring dog in its assigned area this is cause for interference.”**

**Here’s what John has to say, “An outright break, loud whining or barking (that would scare off incoming birds), loud or intimidating commands (often associated with a controlled break), etc. are all grounds for elimination and are relatively easy to judge. Creeping, controlled breaks (in NAHRA) and moderate levels of noise are more difficult to judge.**

There is not a point value for honoring. So as for judging the honor, first it must be determined did the dog commit any faults while honoring? If it did then it should be penalized (points could be deducted from the total score as determined by a judge).

Were there any faults of such severity or multiple faults combined to be considered a Serious Fault? Did that interfere with the working dog? If so, it must be eliminated.

Some additional questions & comments:

Can a blind or a double blind be honored? **No but a diversion bird associated with a blind retrieve could.**

Are dogs running in a brace on an upland test considered an honor? **No. Not just for the upland hunting. But a dog could honor a working dog flushing a bird that was shot, fell & retrieved.**

**John had some comments on Upland honoring, “Depending on how the brace is conducted, it can also test ‘honoring’ in that both dogs must be steady to shot and fall (in the presence of another dog), and in the case of a shot flyer, one dog must remain steady while the other dog attempts to find and retrieve the downed bird.**

If a working dog breaks on the first bird down and the other two birds were not thrown, has the honor dog completed an honor? **No. All three birds would need to be presented with the honor dog in place to complete the honor. The honor dog would need to be re-run. If the other two birds were thrown in sequence then it could be considered an acceptable honor.**

Paul commented, "I think the honor should be set up to give the honoring dog a good chance of holding steady. Preferably behind or a good distance off to the side of the working dog. No matter how well trained the honor dog is, it is probably possible to set up a scenario where they will break, or interfere with the working dog. If as judges we do this, we have compromised the working dog and have we really given a fair test to the honor dog?"

John warns, "avoid setups that require the working dog to cross directly in front of the honor dog when making the first retrieve: give the honor dog room to fail (avoid situations where it only takes a small movement (creep) by the honor dog to interfere with the working dog. Again, try to be considerate of bird locations and order to avoid having the working dog running across the face of the honor dog on the go-bird (which isn't always the bird 'planned' as the go-bird.)"

Paul added, "This does not mean that we have to set up an honor where the dogs are in such close proximity or position as to create a competition between them. An example of this would be having the two dogs almost touching each other with the handlers on the outside of the dogs or having the honor dog be in a direct or close line to the working dogs retrieve."

John said, "make sure you have a plan on what to do if a working dog is not able to complete the test because the honor dog broke or the level of interference may have caused the working dog to be unfairly evaluated. ... have a plan for how you will handle and judge reruns.

And John added, "The issue of interference is probably the most challenging to judge. Try to avoid falling into the trap of letting the working dog's performance dictate whether there was interference. An incredibly focused working dog can ignore almost anything, whereas another dog can be easily distracted by much lower amounts of interference. Try to establish some criteria for judging "interference" that does not depend on the performance of the working dog. For example, think about the amount of noise or movement that could negatively affect the focus of an "average" Senior-level dog, not necessarily the dog under judgement. Be consistent in your judging and be fair with your set-up and expectations."

## Noise

Thank you to the contributing judges who submitted their thoughts about noise. Jeff Riebling, Keith Stroyan and Kent Bull

As pointed out by judge Stroyan, the word noise does not appear in the NAHRA book of regulations for testing hunting retrievers. However, the dog's effectiveness as a conservation tool in hunting situation's is to be judged in all stakes. It is difficult to argue that noise during a hunt doesn't affect that. Judge Bull emphasized that noise, can affect the quality and effectiveness of the hunt and is therefore an important factor to consider in evaluating the handler/dog team during a field test. Judge Reibling makes a distinction between noise prior to birds being shot and noise of excitement when the dog is on its way to make the retrieve.

The following thoughts and guidelines are the consensus of these judges and of several other NAHRA members who submitted responses in the original request for hot topic comments:

1. Although the word noise might not be found, the rule book provides several comments about dogs needing to perform in a manner consistent with the demands of actual hunting.
2. Behaviors that affect the effectiveness of a dog in a hunting situation must be evaluated by the judge.
3. Noise certainly affects the ability of a dog/handler team to meet the standards for conservation tools. Therefore, noise from both dog and handler is also to be evaluated.
4. Noise prior to being released should be judged more harshly than noise after being released.
5. As with other behaviors, excessive and/or repetitive occurrences of noise by either handler or dog may be grounds for elimination.
6. Noise from the honor dog that affects the working dog's performance can be considered interference the same as other honor dog behaviors.

Some comments from our Panel:

**Kent - "Noise in the field can ruin a hunting experience. In the blind, a disobedient and barking dog can destroy the experience (and maybe a friendship with a hunting buddy). In the field, a dog requiring excessive voice and whistle commands can flare game."**

**Jeff - "Noise when the calling is ongoing and the 'birds are coming in' in a judging scenario, is the worst. In a real life hunting scenario, you may never fire a shot and the birds may flare due to whining and certainly to barking."**

**Keith - "There is no doubt that a very noisy dog can be a nuisance in the field and even flare birds."**

**Jeff - "Simply, repeated evidence is grounds for elimination. A dog may lose a point or two, based upon severity of noise in a series. IF the noise continues throughout the event; at some point you have to "drop" the dog from competition based solely upon repeated evidence.**

**Keith - "One example that I think merits elimination is an honor dog barking or excessively whining on an honor. That is interference with the working dog" .....A case of a bark that perhaps does not merit elimination or deduction is, say, an excited bark after the dog is release to get a bird."**

**Kent - "Noise is not a preferred trait in a hunting dog (barking) or a handler (excessive voice and whistle commands). Would I want to hunt with the dog in a blind or field? How about the handler???"**

## STEADINESS

The NAHRA standard requires that dogs of all categories (Started, Hunter, Intermediate, Senior) be steady. Tradition refers to a non-slip retriever. What does being steady mean? Well, the dog is to be placed in a location and remain there until commanded/released to retrieve.

What are the reasons a dog needs to be steady? For efficiency when steady they can focus, better mark the birds that fall. They stay out of the hunter's way. The most important reason is for the safety of their self and of others.

Let's get some input from our panel of Judges about steadiness.

**Troy Callanan says, "Steadiness is a topic near and dear to my heart".**

**Tom Rourke said, "It is situation dependent".**

**Tedd Snodgrass added, "If a dog is unsteady ..... there is usually deeper impact on the quality of the work itself that shows up in the sum of work".**

So these dogs are not statues, how much movement is allowed?

**Tedd – "My thought is that the dog should move it's head or even orient it's body to see what follows in the area of the attracting shot/call.**

**Tom – "If safety is not compromised, I have no issue with dog pivoting to 'square himself' to see the fall better. If safety is, or could be, an issue that animal best create as little of movement/disturbance as possible else face elimination/serious score deductions".**

**Troy – "I don't like the idea of saying that a given distance is "too far", but you know it when you see it.**

When should unsteadiness affect the scoring?

**Troy – "Any time a dog is disobedient, that should affect the scoring to some degree. The judge should also take into account the test scenario, and a NAHRA test should include very exciting and realistic scenarios. In an especially exciting scenario, I would expect to see some degree of creeping from most dogs. Instead of 'marking down' nearly every dog in the field, I might give "+" consideration to .... Dogs that demonstrate exceptional steadiness".**

**Tom – "What is happening in the scenario just before or when the mark released/visible? Either marks that quickly follow one or another OR a delay between marks in a multiple marking situation – both very common hunting situations- can cause even the most steady retriever to "lift his butt". Again, as long as safety isn't compromised and an intent to leave before instructed..... no issue".**

**Tedd – “creeping is a minor offense by itself but can accumulate in the total picture. It may affect a close call (1 or 2 on the day i.e. no round-up if it has been consistent) in combination with other faults e.g. dropping a bird a few times”.**

What’s the difference between creeping and breaking?

**Tom – “Creeping = moving in the direction of the fall/mark, getting a step to a few steps ‘closer’ to the fall. Breaking – the rule book already defines this well. It is ‘manifesting an intent to retrieve before being sent’.** “

**Tedd – “If it moves five feet or more then creeping is being done. Breaking is clear, it is uncontrolled, non-released (often through commands to stop) motion to the fall.**

**Troy – “A ‘creep’ is when a dog moves from the Point of Origin without manifesting an intent to retrieve. A ‘break’ is when a dog leaves the line and manifests an intent to retrieve prior to being released by the judges. A ‘controlled break’ is when a break occurs and the handler is able to bring the dog under control quickly.”**

We asked, can a dog be eliminated for creeping?

**Troy – “A dog can be eliminated for excessive and/or repeated disobedience. Creeping is just a form of disobedience, so creeping needs to be considered when evaluating a dog’s total performance throughout the day.**

**Tedd – “I understand the rules that we operate under as directing that we consider creeping a minor fault so no, I would not eliminate a dog/handler team for creeping however, as discussed above, there is usually deeper impact on the quality of the work itself that shows up in the sum of work”.**

**Tom – “In creeping the dog gains nothing in terms of seeing the fall/mark better. He/she just wants to get ‘out there’ & while it often is a precursor to breaking, it is also a manifestation of drive. This level of creeping is a minor fault. It becomes major in 3 ways:**

- 1. It ‘excites the handler into’ corrective action or**
- 2. Rather than measuring in ‘steps’, the distance travelled from the line before coming to rest is best measured in yards, or**
- 3. It is repeated in each and every testing scenario**

Other comments

**Troy – “Poor test setup can encourage creeping, and I’ll give a couple of examples:**

- 1. If a dog can hear the duck call and winger but can’t see the mark, they may creep in that direction to get a better look. It’s not fair to throw birds in heavy shadows, with a very low arc, or when the arc is concealed by trees.**
- 2. If the Point of Origin is behind a rise or behind a heavy wall of cover, the dog can’t see where the bird falls without creeping forward. I can’t fault a dog for creeping just so that they can see where the mark lands.**

**Tom – “I prefer to construct tests in such a way as to penalize a dog that ‘moves too much’ at the line. For example, moving forward towards that first mark, a flyer, pulls the dog too far forward to see the next mark, and that will often be a more difficult mark. Or, it may pull him down a slope and the next mark(s) then become impossible to see.**

**Troy – “If a judge wants to penalize creeping, then let the dogs penalize themselves. Use a tree or bush a short distance in front of the line, but not between the intended Point of Origin and any area of fall. If a dog creeps.....and then cannot see the second or third mark.....they won’t be successful running the marks, and you simply judge the marks.**

Thank you to our panel. They also submitted comments on Steadiness during the Upland but we’ll save that for another time.

## SWITCHING

Your dog just switched! What does that mean? According to the rule book it means that a serious fault has occurred requiring elimination. Oh no!!! Ok, what does to switch mean? Let's ask an experienced panel of judges to see what they think.

**Tom Moore said, "Any dog that goes to area of a fallen bird during a marking test and establishes a hunt, then leaves that area and establishes a hunt in the area of another fall will be eliminated".**

**Travis Lund said, "Establishing a hunt in one area and leaving it to search for a bird in another area of fall."**

**Jim Karr added, if a dog drops a bird while retrieving from a mark or blind and goes for another bird (diversion bird or an Area of Fall (AOF) not yet visited), this is a switch and the dog must be eliminated.**

We asked what does to "establish a hunt" mean?

**TL – "Dog actively searching for a bird. Nose could be down or up though is generally down and dog is working area actively searching for bird."**

**TM – "They have their nose to the ground and looking for a bird."**

**JK – "Dogs vary in their style of hunting, ranging from natural desire to get out to the AOF with dispatch and, if the dog does not pin the mark, then, using his nose and marking ability, methodically, and with a sense of purpose and perseverance, enthusiastically searches the AOF. Then there are dogs that seem to have little interest in or enthusiasm for retrieving. They lethargically amble out to the AOF, lackadaisically wander around but stay in the AOF..... Both dogs have established a hunt, whether they have or have not found the bird.**

We asked how far apart should the AOF's be?

**TL – "Depends on distance, direction of throw, terrain, water, cover, wind, etc. Also depends on the level (category) being tested,**

**TM – AOF should be "at least 45 yards" apart.**

We asked what affect does the AOF have on a dog to switch?

**All agreed that the proximity, closeness of the fall areas combined with factors can significantly impact the likelihood of a dog to switch.**

Here's some additional comments:

**TL – “I hate when I see ..... Overlapping AOF’s.” Also “marks where the dog is out of sight and can’t be seen switching from one AOF to another. Those setups don’t allow for any savior by the handler.”**

**JK – “From the perspective of the hunting scenario, does an in-line (over/under), hot blind or other components of a test that contribute to the temptation to switch, make sense?” and “Handlers should be ready to intervene so as to prevent their dog from switching.....”**

Submitted scenario:

Double land mark, go bird is a shot pheasant flyer, memory bird is a duck. 75 yards between AOF’s.

Dog 1 – gets halfway to the go bird and veers over to get the memory bird. This not a switch

Dog 2 – blasts thru the AOF of the go bird, never slows down and goes over to retrieve the duck. This is not a switch

Dog 3 - This dog establishes a hunt on the pheasant, can’t find it and goes over to retrieve the duck. This is a switch

(Caution on Dog 3 – Judge’s should go to the AOF to locate the pheasant to insure it wasn’t a runner. And to determine if it is in a condition that should have been retrieved. If the bird cannot be located or is not fit to retrieve then the dog should get another set of birds/rerun.) This needs to be done prior to determining it is a switch.