

The Game

The Art of Judging

By Ken Thorson

Many of us in the field trial sport envision judging as an art with AKC rules to follow. If judging is an art, how can guidance be provided to truly appreciate this kind of art? Basically, appreciation of this art may involve understanding the essential principles of judging.

Is the process of judging American retriever trials merely an art because there are so many shades of gray between black and white? Consider this – any senior retriever enthusiast who is familiar with essentials of the scientific method would probably agree that judgment is not an exact science. This person recognizes that some methods of science are involved.

exercise his or her powers independent of the other judge. The retrievers must be tested until each judge is convinced that he or she has witnessed a winning performance, and both judges must agree, independently, that the winner is obviously the winner. In short, the conclusion must be completely satisfactory to each judge, otherwise, an additional series must be conducted. Moreover, the contestants know that when there is not a wide difference between first and second places, while the first place entry is a clear and obvious winner, the handler (owner and/or supporter) of the second place dog will almost invariably say, “I was surprised when you stopped; I thought you would run another series.”



Certainly, judges are expected to collect carefully and classify accurately, their facts and observations, to note their sequence, relationships, and relative significance, and to make inferences based upon the facts, not on personal emotions, whims, or prejudices.

If a judge routinely is a party to conducting a stake where only about six dogs or fewer complete out of about 35 starters, then the amateurs and professionals are inclined to suspect that this judge is evading his or her responsibility to exercise judgement. In short, they may suspect that this judge is acting merely in an executive role for the trial-giving club. That is, he is setting tests which the dogs can barely complete, thus he avoids judgements. Also, this behavior is seen by competitors this way; although the judges have full authority, neither judge is simply a referee nor is he or she simply an umpire. Setting up tests requires the combined skill and judgment of both judges. Each judge should

Contestants should expect a judge have a clear idea of what he or she is looking for in a retriever. The tests must be set up to select that ideal retriever. This means the judge should want a winner of the stake he or she judges to be the retriever that he or she would like to take home after the trial. The “ideal retriever” is one criterion of his or her performance as a judge.

We urge preparation by those who judge. We believe any person who judges or nominates a judge, would profit from struggling through the mental exercise of preparing a set of specifications or appropriate guide lines to be used.

Judging is a dilemma we must all face as competitors in the Retriever Field Trial Game. One would say that we must all face this, because it is a responsibility of all competitors to take an active part in the clubs, judging and helping at the National at some time or other.

Not many books are available to guide up-coming new judges on

what a trial is all about. AKC requires a new judge to take a test, which will familiarize the new comer with the rules and regulations for this sport. Other than that there are no real guide lines to instruct an individual on how to prepare for this new experience, what to look for, how to act, responsibilities, set ups, etc..

During the last forty to fifty years, field trials have grown and evolved to a higher level of excellence. There are more skilled handlers, training techniques and better training grounds than ever before. Also, breeding programs have produced improvement in performance and intelligence. Competitors have become keener on placing or winning more than ever before. This phenomenon is partly because of the prestige earned, but it is also due to the money to be made from professional training, retriever sales, stud fees and puppy sales. The responsibility of judging the retriever today has risen to a higher standard, but continues in the same manner of some forty years ago.

We would assume that in an ideal world, judges would wish to judge a retriever for one reason: to put something back into the sport by helping to select the best and most competent dogs for future breeding. However, judges are human with all that it implies in the way of flawed integrity and genuine mistakes. Unfortunately, many judges today are only interested in reaching a result, not necessarily the right result. There are also those who are resistant to change and continue to do things the old way. It is much easier to put dogs out for minor mistakes than to keep them in and assess the whole of the work done during a trial. This behavior could be due partly to the size of the entries, which have grown with the evolution of competence, interest and competitive nature of people.

Today many newcomers are extremely keen to become judges. This is partly because they think that they will get better treatment from existing judges if they are going to have the chance to “judge the judge” on some future occasion. They also feel that there are considerable kudos in becoming a field trial judge and cannot wait to begin climbing the ladder. In the past, in the process of doing so, those who have risen in the ranks tend to have a reputation of either being a positive or negative judge, or a reputation that applies to both.

A Negative judge is one who will call back only those dogs whose performances meet some arbitrary mental image or some standard of an acceptable level of performance. Ideally, one could say that a Negative judge would like to eliminate

all entries that do not do perfect or near perfect work. Judges like this tend to design their tests to eliminate dogs.

On the other hand, the Positive judge has an attitude toward judging that is much more difficult than a Negative judge. This judge considers the stake to be a contest among teams composed of retrievers and their handlers. They also will take the time to look at eagerness, enthusiasm, keenness, concentration on marking, accuracy of marking, line taken to mark and blind, self-confidence and perseverance in the search, willingness to take directions from his handler, retrieving quickly and briskly with a good carry, delivering tenderly to hand, steadiness, and use of nose. A judge that looks for these qualities will set his or her tests up

I hope this article furthers your understanding by providing some insights on judging

such to bring out the excellence of these qualities. This type of judge wants to see the dogs run. They are constantly aware that the major goal is to select the top dog, not to eliminate the less perfect one.

A judge must realize that the licensed retriever trials are the showcase for American retrievers. They are not training sessions. Consequently, a judge must be aware of his or her responsibilities during a field trial. A judge must also accept the responsibility for setting and demanding high standards; not only for performance of the retriever in the field, but for selected other activities connected with the execution of the trial. Furthermore, a judge is the person who ultimately has the responsibility for bringing sons, daughters, or grandchildren into the sport. Finally, a judge must also recognize that the entire field trial organization depends upon responsible, experienced people to properly introduce younger and/or less experienced judges to the game.

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Ken Thorson has written two books for the sport of field trials: “Competitive Retriever Training – My Reference Notes On Rex’s Preliminary Force Program and Basics” and “Judging Field Trials – Preparation and Mechanics.” He is in the process of writing a book on “Transition and All-Age Training” and this article is an excerpt from his current book. Ken resides with his wife, Sandi, in Bloomington, California and can be reached by email at kthor1@juno.com.