

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

Tightening Up The Retrieve

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The retrieve of shot bird—whether it be a duck, chukar or some other game bird used in NAVHDA UT and UPT testing—is the culmination of teamwork between handler and dog. Everything leads up to the retrieve. A dog in the field is expected to search with great enthusiasm and intelligence, investigate nooks and crannies that might hold a bird, and, when a bird is scented, the dog is expected to point to the bird’s whereabouts so the handler can produce the bird for the gun. Once the point is established, the dog is expected to remain steady and not move until the retrieve command is given. This all seems simple enough, but one area that we, as judges, have found to be lacking correctness is the retrieve, especially in the Utility Test.

The *Aims, Programs, and Test Rules* book clearly states on page 26: “On command, the dog should go quickly to the fallen bird, pick it up, go directly to the handler and then wait calmly until told to release the bird to hand.” Over the past number of years, the retrieve of bird has become a little “user friendly” and at times down-right sloppy, but the real issue is that these sloppy retrieves have been rewarded with Prize I scores. No longer will this be acceptable. During the past three Judges Workshops we have discussed the retrieve issue, and this year the point was driven home quite firmly. We, as judges, will be scoring retrieves relative to what is written in Rules book. What does that mean to you, the handler?

Before I answer that, let me go through what constitutes a retrieve. The retrieve has four basic components,

each of which can be further broken down, but, for simplicity and brevity, I will talk about the four basics: release by handler (fetch command), pick-up, return to handler, and presentation. The release by handler by way of a fetch command is given to the dog once the bird lands on the ground. There should be a distinct pause between when the bird lands on the ground and when the release command is given. The dog is expected to go directly to the bird with enthusiasm, and once it reaches the bird the pick-up segment of the retrieve starts. The dog is expected to quickly pick up the bird and start back to the handler. Rolling the bird around, picking it up and dropping it, and picking it up again more than once may (probably will) cause a reduction in the dog’s overall retrieve score. Once the dog has secured the bird in its mouth and has turned back to the handler, the return to handler portion starts. The dog is expected to return directly to the handler quickly, happily, and enthusiastically. Dropping the bird during the return will result in points marked against the dog. Now we come to the point of the retrieve that we judges have been discussing for some time. The end of the return to handler and the presentation of the bird should be a smooth transition. The dog is expected to come directly to the handler and stand or sit quietly, calmly and closely in front of or beside the handler. The dog is expected to hold the bird until given the release command whereupon it delivers the bird to hand. The dog is expected to be close enough to the handler so that no steps are required on the part of the handler to accept the bird.

Fly-bys, reach and grabs, parading around gunners and judges, dropping the bird (no matter how close to the handler), extra commands after the initial release command—all of these will result in points against the dog’s retrieve score. It is a matter of fact that the Utility dog is expected to be a finished gun dog with the hope of some owners and handlers that said dog will participate in the Invitational Test. In order to qualify for the Invitational the dog must receive all Prize I scores in the Utility Test. That means a score of 3 or 4 is required in the retrieve elements of the test, and there are three retrieve elements to the test: retrieve of shot bird in the field, retrieve of duck, and retrieve by drag. What is stated above applies to all three retrieve scenarios.

During the Utility Preparatory Test judges are more lenient because this is a more lenient test. UPT dogs are

not finished gun dogs but are well on their way to such status. What is expected of the UPT dog with regards to retrieves is spelled out on page 17 of the Aims Book under the heading “Retrieve of Duck,” and these standards apply to the retrieve of shot bird in the field as well as retrieve of duck and retrieve by drag.

The UPT dog is expected, on the release by the handler, to go directly to the bird, pick up the bird and return straight on to the handler. During the return the dog is expected to maintain a firm and even grip. When the



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UPT dog reaches the handler it is expected to deliver the bird a reasonable distance from the handler. A reasonable distance is now described as within one step of the handler. The UPT dog does not have to deliver to hand to receive a Prize I retrieving score, but it must be within one step of the handler. The dog that puts the bird down outside the one step requirement but within a reasonable distance of the handler can still receive a passing score. Parading around the judges and gunners, spitting the bird out way out of reach of the handler, playing keep away are all faults and will be judged accordingly. Verbal commands should be kept to a minimum, and the amount of commands and loudness of such commands will be noted by the judges and come into account when judging the dog's retrieve scores. While the Utility Preparatory Test is just that, a preparatory test before going on to the Utility Test, it is still expected that the UPT dog perform at a high level while being judged with a fair amount of leniency. Judges realize the UPT dog is not as finished a dog as a UT dog, but the UPT dog should present itself in such a way that a hunter would be pleased to have such a dog with him/her in the field, woods and duck blind.

Handlers, trainers, clinic leaders, and judges need to be aware that starting now, there will be a new emphasis placed on the retrieve of bird. The retrieve needs to be "tightened up." Trainers need to train for proper retrieves, clinic leaders need to express this commitment to better retrieves to their audience during clinics, handlers need to handle with all that is stated above firmly in mind, and judges need to judge accordingly. When a dog has done wonderful work searching for the bird, finding the bird through use of nose, pointing the bird and remaining steady throughout the sequence, it would be a shame for that wonderful vision to be tarnished by a sloppy retrieve. 🐾

A group of knowledgeable judges and trainers has been assembled and are available to answer your questions about training and testing. The topic will vary each month based on the questions we receive from our VHD readers. Please send your questions to vhd@navhda.org with On the Right Track in the subject line.



Bob Fee was born and lives in New Hampshire with his wife, Lyn, two dogs and a cat. He graduated from Colorado State University, then owned and operated a large, successful restaurant until he and his wife sold it and retired in 2006. Once hunting season starts, Bob loads up the travel trailer and heads for the UP of Michigan and the Maine North Woods in search of Ruffed Grouse. He is also an avid hiker and biker. Bob has been a member of NAVHDA for 17 years, a judge for eight years and senior judge for four years.

About The Cover



VC TOP SHELF'S OZZMAN COMETH, GERMAN WIREHAired POINTER, OWNED AND HANDLED BY JEFF JALBERT AT THE 2018 INVITATIONAL. PHOTO BY DENISE HEATH.



Hardcore hunting dogs. Birds in the bag. Good looks not required.



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