

About The Cover

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

By **Tim Otto**
Flemington, New Jersey
Cover Photo By Jay Hoth

Handling In The Field

Q • At the beginning of my field sequence the judges told me to handle my dog like I normally would, but then during the test sometimes they asked me to call my dog around (when I normally wouldn't) and other times asked me not to call him (when I normally would). What gives?

Why was I asked not to give my dog a "whoa" command when he was clearly "getting birdy?" I didn't want him to go in and catch the bird.

Several other handlers told me that I would be penalized for calling my dog during the NA test. Is that true?

A • Knowing when you should give your dog commands in the field during testing can be confusing. Typically, whether it's an NA, UPT, or UT test, before going out in the field the judge handling you and your dog will often tell you something like this: "Handle your dog as you normally would during training or hunting..." And this is exactly what you should do. Often, though, at some point one of the judges may ask you to call your dog around when you might not have otherwise.

Why might the judges ask you to call your dog around? There are many reasons why, but, in my experience, one of the most common reasons is to get your dog out of potential trouble. For example, late in the day, the previously flushed but unshot birds often congregate in woods adjacent to the field where you're testing; if judges see your dog going into an area they know is full of birds running in the open, they may tell you to call your dog out of there because, really, nothing good can happen in that situation. Remember, the judges are truly there to help you. Another reason judges may ask you to call your dog is to get it back into the relevant area. As described in the Search portion of the *NAVHDA: Aims, Program, Test Rules* booklet, "the dog should conduct its search at a practical distance from the gun" and "... the uncontrolled dog running the far horizons is of little use to the on-foot hunter." If the judges sense that your dog





JAY HOTH © 2017

may be out of practical range, they will likely ask you to call him back. Yet another reason they may ask you to call your dog is to get a sense of whether your dog is cooperative or, in the case of the UPT or UT test, obedient (obedience is not scored in the NA test). Handlers and their dogs should display a sense of teamwork, particularly in the UPT and UT tests; a dog that won't heed a handler's call to come around will probably not be getting maximum scores in cooperation or obedience. Still another reason a judge may ask you to call your dog around when you might not normally is to get it on a bird in a known location. Perhaps they are on the fence about your pointing score, or steadiness or retrieving in UPT and UT, and need to see another bird contact to settle the issue.

Equally often, judges might ask you to *not* give your dog verbal commands when you might normally. Again, there are way too

many reasons why this might be the case to describe here, but always when this happens, they are trying to help you and your dog in some way. Perhaps they want to see a little more independence and willingness to search. Maybe you were either knowingly or unknowingly "whoa-ing" your dog when you see it getting birdy. If this happens, judges will almost certainly ask you not to do that on subsequent bird contacts, because a dog on "whoa" is not pointing. Again, quoting from the Aims manual, "When game is located the dog must establish point naturally. The handler is strictly prohibited from giving any commands or gestures which may induce the dog to point." With respect to the "whoa" command, many of us use it during training after the dog has gone on point as we are moving in to flush the bird, and then instinctively use it at that time during testing. Here is another case where judges may ask you to keep quiet so that they can fully judge steadiness. The whoa



JAY HOTH © 2017



GUNDAWG PHOTOGRAPHY © 2017

command in this circumstance should definitely be used if you absolutely need it to stop the dog from breaking, but otherwise try and resist the temptation. Another reason you might be asked to keep quiet is to assess cooperation or obedience – does the dog pay attention to where you are and move with you, or is it out self-hunting? A dog that doesn't care where his or her handler is and is out hunting for itself alone is not a cooperative dog, and his or her scores will probably reflect that.

I can't tell you the number of times I've seen or heard judges ask a handler to call their dog around and the handler stays quiet. Sometimes it's nerves – handlers often don't hear too well when they're running dogs (I know I don't!). A number of handlers, though, have told me and others that they've heard that verbally communicating with their dog during the field search is penalized in some way. This is absolutely untrue! You should remember that you and your dog are a team, and teamwork requires communication. Trust me, if judges feel you're being too communicative, they'll tell you.

During testing, remember to "handle your dog as you normally do during training or hunting." If the judges need to see something or you are overdoing it, they will let you know. Remember, NAVHDA Judges are trying to help you get the best performance from your dog. 🐾

Tim Otto is a Senior Judge and has been a member of the Del Val Chapter in New Jersey for 17 years. During that time he has served in a number of positions including Director of Training and Test Secretary. He is currently serving as Director of Publications for NAVHDA International. Tim is an avid upland and waterfowl hunter, and has hunted from New Brunswick Canada to Kansas. Like many NAVHDA members, when he is not hunting his dogs he's training them. He has handled dogs at all levels of testing in the NAVHDA system, and has passed two of his German Wirehairs in the Invitational. Tim lives outside of Flemington, New Jersey with his wife Jane, dogs Moose and Rip, horse Bolero, and about 30 pigeons that don't have names. He has been a professor at Rutgers University since 1993.

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 the NAVHDA Office at navoffice@navhda.org with "On the Right Track" in the subject line.
