

ON THE RIGHT TRACK

By Tim Otto
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The Utility Blind Sequence – Training and Testing Tips.

Last month Mark Whalen wrote a great article on transitioning from NA to UT training, and in it he briefly mentioned a few training tips regarding the Utility Blind Sequence. In this article, I hope to not only describe in detail the individual components of the Blind Sequence itself, but additionally to expand on some of the tips Mark mentioned briefly.

What I refer to here as the “Blind Sequence” is actually composed of four separate segments, each of which is scored independently. These are, in order, Heeling, Remaining by the Blind, Steadiness at the Blind, and Retrieve of Duck. Before you start the sequence, the judges will sometimes ask whether you want your instructions all at once or rather have them described individually at the beginning of each separate segment of the sequence. Under these conditions, my own preference is to take them all at once so that I can execute the entire sequence without stopping, but during training you should always practice stopping between each segment and mimic receiving instructions so that, if that happens in a test, it won't be the first time! One additional training tip: *you should always train for the Blind Sequence*

with plenty of other people around to mimic the conditions of the test (three judges, possibly two apprentices, and usually a small gallery) and to provide distractions for your dog. Finally, many people wait to train for the Blind Sequence until after they have a rock-solid duck search. Training for them simultaneously can cause confusion for some dogs and negatively impact duck search training.

The heeling course is composed of 10 pairs of gates, which will form a heeling course roughly three feet wide and approximately 50 yards long, with a curve or bend in the course, and ending at a blind at the water's edge. Of course, there are sometimes limitations on the heeling course imposed by the landscape, so the suggested 50-yard length of the course is more of a guideline than an absolute requirement.



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You will be given a break-open 12g shotgun which you will carry with you through the heeling course. *The scoring for heeling begins when the handler gives his/her first command*, whether that is a verbal “heel”, a tug on the leash, a slap on thigh, or some other command the handler chooses; *the scoring ends not at the last gate, but when the handler/dog reaches the blind at the edge of the water*. Throughout the heeling course, judges will be looking for a loose lead – many experienced handlers are careful to *make sure that there is an obvious “J” in the lead prior to starting the course*, that is, that the lead hangs in such a way that the bottom part of the “J” in the lead hangs below the dog's collar. Starting off with a tight lead will accentuate even the most minor problems. Judges will be watching the dog closely

to determine whether it is tugging on the lead or lurching ahead of the handler. Corrections by the handler, ranging from jerking on the lead, obvious scuffing of the feet, or a verbal command can lower the heeling score. Heeling is one of the absolutely basic and necessary things our dogs will ever do, so the best way to do well in this portion of the test is simple: teach your dog to heel well with distractions around. *The value of great heeling extends well beyond the score you get in your Utility test!*

At the end of the heeling course, you will begin the “Remain by Blind” component of the sequence, and you will be asked to first position your dog either inside or next to the blind and remove the lead; it doesn't matter whether you have your dog sit, stand, or lie down, and you can leave your



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lead or some other item with, but not touching, the dog. The judges will then ask you to take your shotgun and two blank “popper” loads and position yourself in a location they indicate that will be out of sight of your dog. When properly positioned, you will shoot two rounds approximately 10 seconds apart, then return to your dog. A training tip Mark mentioned last month is absolutely key – although in the test itself you will be asked to fire twice, **during training you should always mix this up, sometimes firing once, sometimes five times, sometimes not at all.** If you only fire two shots every time you train, your dog will learn pretty quickly that it’s over at two shots, which can lead to problems with breaking. **You should also vary where you go to fire your shots during training** – sometimes to the left, sometimes to the right, sometimes behind the dog. Just because you

go to a particular place during training on your home grounds doesn’t necessarily mean that’s where the judges will ask you to go on test day, and you and your dog need to be ready for anything. It’s important to note too that whining (I’m referring to the dog here, but I imagine it would apply to the handler as well!) or barking during this phase will almost certainly lower your score; the logic here is that if the dog is vocalizing in a duck hunting situation, that would likely result in your ducks flaring on you. After firing your two shots, return to your dog calmly. Throughout this sequence, your dog is expected to remain in the position you left him - sitting, standing, or lying down in or next to the blind – for a maximum score of 4. If the dog takes a step or two in any direction, the dog can receive a Prize I score (3) but not a 4. Abandoning the blind, for example entering the water or taking a number of steps toward the handler, is not a good thing and if severe enough could cost you a prize completely. **You should always train with someone you trust and who knows your dog;** ask him/her to stand about 15 feet behind your dog and give them your e-collar transmitter or make verbal corrections should the dog misbehave while you can’t see him.

The “Steadiness by Blind” segment immediately follows Remain by Blind. If you left your dog in the blind during Remain by Blind you will need to reposition your dog so that it is standing or sitting next to the blind facing the water; you can also reposition him if you left him outside the blind if you choose. Once your dog is positioned next to the blind and you are in the blind, load a popper into your gun and indicate to the judges that you are ready. At this point a distraction gunner positioned well to the left or right of the blind will fire a shot, and you

will fire soon thereafter. After you are reloaded, the distraction gunner will fire yet another shot, and just after this the judges will indicate that a dead duck be launched so that it lands approximately 50 yards away, preferably in open water. You fire your final shot while the duck is in the air to mimic actually shooting a duck. Your dog is expected to remain steady without commands until released for the retrieve; there should be a noticeable pause between when the duck lands and when you send the dog. As with the Remain by Blind component, **during training you should always vary the number and sequence of shots fired during the Steadiness by Blind segment. You should also plan on launching two or three ducks once in a while during training. Keep it interesting.** This is perhaps even more important than during training for Remain by Blind because if you always fire a total of four shots while training, your dog will very quickly learn that the duck always appears after the third shot, which dramatically increases the chances that it will break after the third shot in anticipation of the duck. As an extreme example of the “mix it up” philosophy, I know one very well-respected trainer whose dogs never hear the four shots used during testing until the day of the test itself.

Judgment for the “Retrieve of Duck” component begins when you give your fetch command. Your dog is expected to swim directly to the duck, pick it up, and return to you by land or water and complete the finished retrieve. More specifically, upon return your dog “should sit or stand quietly close to the handler until commanded to release the duck to hand. Anticipating this command or dropping the game must be penalized.” I’ve copied this directly from the NAVHDA Aims manual because it’s the best, most succinct description of a finished retrieve as I’ve seen. “Fly-by” retrieves where the dog is trotting past the handler, requiring to handler to reach out and snatch the duck as the dogs passes by will be penalized, as will dropping the duck on the way, playing with the duck, etc. Here’s a testing tip – **if your dog meets the conditions for a finished retrieve, that is, standing or sitting quietly, don’t hesitate to give your “out” command and get that duck.** All too often I’ve seen handlers waiting and waiting for... What? I don’t know.

Assuming you’ve read this far, it almost certainly took you longer than actually executing the Blind Sequence itself (although during the test it can sometimes seem like a very long time). The bottom line here is that this sequence is actually composed of four independent segments scored individually. Train with people around and mix it up. Over-training this segment of the Utility test can get boring for both you and the dog, particularly if it’s the same every time. Keep it fun and interesting, and don’t overdo it. 🐾



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Tim Otto is a Senior Judge and has been a member of the Del Val Chapter in New Jersey for 18 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 vhd@navhda.org with “On the Right Track” in the subject line.