

AN OVERVIEW OF FIELD TRIALS

Field Trials are also referred to as Stakes which dates back to when two gentleman guns had a wager with each other as to whose dog were the better and this explains why prize money is always given. (For the more detailed background, please see extracts of a talk given by Anne Greaves, KC FT Secretary, in the 2008 Newsletter).

The definitions of the three most commonly held Stakes are:

Novice: For dogs that have not previously won 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th in a 24 Dog Open Stake, 1st, 2nd or 3rd in a 12 Dog Open Stake or a 1st in an All Aged or Novice Stake

All Aged: The host Society/Club can decide the entry criteria

Open: Preference in the draw will be given to dogs that have gained the following awards: 1st, 2nd, 3rd or 4th in an 24 Dog Open Stake, 1st, 2nd or 3rd in a 12 Dog Open Stake, 1st in a Novice or All Aged Stake.

Field trial entries are decided by ballot drawn on average between seven and fourteen days before the Stake. We, like a lot of Clubs, run a Novice and an Open with either another Novice or All Aged Stake. Whilst getting a run in our trials can almost be taken for granted, to stand a realistic chance of competing in any others, handlers need to belong to numerous Gundog Clubs but even then there is no guarantee of success in a draw that is probably going to number fifty plus nominations for a Novice or All Aged Stake (12, 14 or 16 places) and typically well over a hundred qualified dogs (sometimes nearer 200) for an Open Stake (12 or 24 places). It is therefore very unpredictable; you may not get a run all season or, if at the top of the reserve list, get a phone call the night before – at best you will get about two weeks notice. Imagine if the same system were used for Champ Shows!

The very nature of the entry system means that a dog must be kept 'up to speed' throughout the shooting season so that any coveted opportunity is neither wasted nor, in view of the pressure on entries, someone else deprived of a run. It is a condition of entry that the dog concerned is not known to be unsteady, hard mouthed or whine and a handler would soon lose the respect of their peers and do the breed no favours if they were to compete with a dog that is likely to run in, damage birds or make a noise, all of which are eliminating faults. The latter two are deemed to be hereditary and can only be effectively assessed in the shooting field. It usually takes a handler at least two years to train a dog up to trial standard which is why they place so much importance on their dogs coming from tested and proven stock; this may not negate the risk of these hereditary faults completely but it will certainly minimise it.

There is a strict code of etiquette in the shooting field, primarily for safety reasons. There are also additional KC regulations relating to the sport and by signing the entry form (for either a field trial or working test), the handler is stating that they have read those regulations and will abide by them. It is therefore essential to know what they are and the Kennel Club produce a small booklet "Field Trial Regulations (including Gundog Working Tests)" which is updated annually and costs £1.50.

Without the generous hospitality of land owners and guns as well as the willingness of Judges to give up their time on our behalf, possibly at the expense of applying for a run with their own dog elsewhere, field sports could not exist. To avoid grounds and Judges being lost, as has happened in the past, it is the responsibility of all participants at gundog events, be it a working test, SDC or a field trial, to remember that we are guests and should not abuse that hospitality and our Host/Guns/Judges' enjoyment of their day by behaving in an unsportsmanlike manner or competing with dogs that are not up to the expected standard; we are representing our breed as well as the sport.

There are two types of trials; a driven or walked up with either the three or four Judges.

Driven: The dogs stand in line with the guns, or behind it, and the birds are driven towards them by the beaters. Dogs are expected to remain steady and quiet throughout the drive unless sent for a runner by the Judge.

Walked Up: This is exactly the same as a walk up at a working test and can be in woodland, sugar beet, plough, stubble etc. In a Novice Stake, the line will stop when a bird is shot and one dog will be worked at a time; in an Open Stake the line will again stop but the guns may continue to shoot whilst a dog is working and there could be more than one dog out.

Working tests are marked out of twenty, field trial retrieves are graded; as a guide, an A+ for achieving an eye wipe or taking a line to retrieve a bird that has run, A, A- or a B for other retrieves. Competitors do not have the opportunity to see their grades in a trial. With the exception of an eye wipe or first dog down rule*, the eliminating and major faults equate to what constitutes a zero or low mark at a working test. However, this is where the difference between the two disciplines lies; in a working test, each exercise is assessed in its own right and whereas a dog scoring a zero in one test can carry on competing, it would be eliminated from a trial immediately even if, for example, it runs in or whines while waiting in line for its first retrieve. The Judges get together initially after the second round and at various other stages throughout a trial to compare notes and decide which dogs to keep in and which to drop; for example, a dog that has been given a B (roughly the equivalent of 15 or less out of 20 in a GWT), is highly unlikely to be taken forward to the next round.

In both walked up and driven trials, the norm is for two retrieves in the first round, one in the second and two in the third after which, and depending on how many dogs are left in, the Judges will probably join forces to assess the dogs for the remaining rounds. The dogs in the awards will have had at least five retrieves and if there is not enough game to fulfil this requirement, the trial will be declared null and void. All the Judges have to sign a Game Certificate to the effect that there was sufficient game to warrant a result.

Dogs are, where possible, sent for wounded birds first and natural game finding is therefore of foremost importance but unless the dog goes where it is sent, that ability could result in picking the wrong bird, eg: dead as opposed to injured. Judges are therefore looking for a dog that will go out with drive to the area designated, use its nose and deliver the bird safely to hand with minimal interference from its handler. However, as with GWTs, whether a dog has marked its retrieve or not, it is better to blow your whistle and help it succeed quickly rather than let it go out of area or too far off line – playing 'catch up' delays the object of the exercise (a swift retrieve) and does not score brownie points.

The above might sound a little daunting and without doubt an element of luck is needed but in reality, there is no reason why an efficient, steady, quiet and soft mouthed picking up dog that is on the whistle and will handle should not be able to hold its own in a Novice trial. There really is no mystique about the sport and without exception, Flatcoat owners trial their picking up dogs, rather than the other way round, and the only concession they may make is to take another one out with them to gather up any runners during a drive thus enhancing the steadiness training of the ones currently competing. A Novice Stake is just the shooting field's equivalent of a Championship Show but if you are in any doubt as to whether your dog is ready to trial, please get in touch with either myself, a member of the FT Sub or one of the Live Game Mentors (listed on the website, in the current Year Book and Newsletter), who will be happy to advise you.

Sheila D Neary
Hon FT Secretary
(2006 – 2011)

*For general field trial terminology and an explanation of these two terms, please refer to Becky Johnson's "Field Trial Terminology" article on page 59 in the 2002 Autumn Newsletter.