

# Judging Pointing Breed Field Trials

By Gene Shultz

## CHAPTER II – POSITIVE vs. NEGATIVE

As I have traveled around the country conducting Field Trial Seminars, I always asked the group these questions: “How many of you are or want to be positive judges?” Nearly 100% of the people respond. I ask, “How many of you are negative judges?” No one ever responds. It is almost as though the understanding is that it would be better to have the plague than to be labeled a negative judge although by far the majority of our judges today have many negative tendencies. Perhaps we do not all have the same understanding about this subject. The discussions throughout the field trial world with some of our most knowledgeable judges reveal the following:

1. The positive judge is the one who orders up dogs for only those things listed in the rules. They are the people who evaluate each dog starting with zero and adding pluses or building as they go, subtracting for negatives as they appear. They are placing dogs with the highest total picture or score. They are capable of viewing each and every incident in a positive manner, and if a doubt exists, gives the doubt to the dog. They could, and many times do, put up a dog with a mistake or flaw in his total performance.

2. The negative judge is the one who has a list of bad things he watches for and as these things appear, he eliminates that dog from consideration. The length of the list the negative judge carries in his mind varies depending upon background, experience with training and running dogs, or perhaps something he read last night.

One thing is quite evident; it is more difficult to be a positive judge than a negative judge. The positive judge requires more knowledge and must be able to identify and evaluate desirable traits and abilities in this dog. He must have the background that comes from personal handson experience of training, competing, and hunting over quality bird dogs.

An even better background might be provided if the individual has bred enough dogs to appreciate the genetics in such qualities as class and style, desire and knowledge, intelligence, as well as understanding which are trained qualities.

We also know the great dogs who demonstrate speed, desire, are very positive on bird work, and are appealing to the eye, have greater risk in their performance. These dogs may show an error, but their positives usually overshadow their negatives.

Another reality always agreed to is that positive judging usually leads to the placement of the outstanding dog. Further, if we concede that the outstanding performance may be marred along the way with an error due to much greater exposure, then the probability is greater that the winning performance may have had an error or flaw.

On the other hand, negative judging usually produces mediocrity since many or most of the outstanding performances produce a flaw and are eliminated.

The American Kennel Club rules contain only one instance that states that a dog “must be ordered up” and that is when a dog steals its brace mates point.

The rules also state that a dog “must be disqualified” if it is not present at the place where it is to start within five minutes after it is called for by the judge.

A dog out of judgment for a continuous period of more than five minutes, or for more than onesixth of the time specified for the heat, if over 30 minutes, shall not be placed unless seen on point by the judge or unless in the opinion of the judges, the dog’s absence was due to unusual conditions.

The American Kennel Club rules state that the judges have the full power to turn out of any stake any dog that does not reasonably obey its handler or that interferes with the work of its brace mate, and any handler who in their opinion willfully interferes with another handler or his dog.

The rules further state that a dog may be disqualified for the following reasons:

- A. If it has cut the specified course in order to reach the bird field.
- B. If its handler receives assistance in controlling the dog or if the dog receives direction of any kind from anyone except its handler.

Even though these are the only instances where the rules provide for a dog to be ordered up or disqualified, many judges have lists that must be much longer than this. It is difficult to understand how these things have developed in the minds of many people.

The American Field states the issue of ordering dogs up even more clearly by simply stating that, “A dog may be ordered up by the judges only if it interferes with its brace mate.” The American Kennel Club rules give us many things we want to see in our dogs by providing standards of performance in each type stake and further delineating things we expect or should see in the dog’s performance. The negative part of judging germinated right here. When the rules state that a dog shall or should perform in a certain manner, people have viewed that as an absolute and it must be conformed to 100 percent of the time with no deviation. If that was the intention, I believe that they would have been stated as disqualifications. Here is where the difficulty begins. If a dog demonstrates a particular activity five or ten times and then fails to demonstrate it once, should the dog be disqualified? The negative judge says yes, usually due to the fact he has developed a mind set against all these things that he does not want to see. By looking for things he does not want to see, his job is greatly simplified and requires much less knowledge. He does not have to evaluate the overall performance, giving positives or plus marks for doing something five or ten times, then a negative or minus for failing once, and then rendering an overall evaluation. No, the job has just been over simplified by discarding the dog from consideration.

Many judges feel they are positive when they memorize all the positive things we want to see in our dogs and when seeing a deviation from that, they discard, discount, or forget all about that dog.

The difficulty seems to arise when a dog demonstrates a flaw and the judge continues to consider that dog. The judge must have a set of values that allows for adding pluses, subtracting minuses, and coming up with a comparative analysis and a determination of the best dogs seen that particular day, on those particular grounds, under those particular conditions.

I believe a good rule of thumb that helps a judge make a determination is to look for the dog that he would like to take home or breed to his dog or bitch.

In discussing the subject around the country with bird dog people, they always say that when running their dog in competition, they want to be judged by a positive judge. Yet it seems that when the other dogs are run, they want them judged in a negative manner. Well now – that is some conflict! What does it mean? It means that when a person runs his own dog, he sees all the positives and minimizes or forgets the negatives. In viewing the other dogs, he sees the negatives and remembers them very clearly. The positives in his dog become magnified in his mind and the negatives of the other dogs also become magnified in his mind. Many times that person begins comparing the positives of his own dog against the negatives of the placed dogs. Then the comments begin – “That dog did this or that” and “My dog did all this.”

I believe it is much more difficult to be a truly positive judge from two points of view. First, it requires an extensive knowledge and a good set of values. Second, the best and/or placed dog may have demonstrated a flaw that has been magnified in the minds of the other handlers.

Further, I believe we have far too many people who think they are positive judges but who carry around negative ideas in their minds in order to disqualify a dog for actions not shown in the rules as clear disqualifications. One might say, “You are not truly a positive judge until you have eliminated all the negatives.”

### **CHAPTER III – BIRD DOG VALUES**

When a person acquires his first bird dog puppy, his values begin to develop. That person has certain things he is looking for. Those are usually such things as: friendly, cute, pretty or eye appealing, looks healthy, and perhaps is bred from good stock. Later the person becomes more discriminating and his values change. He wants more in his dog. His knowledge of bird dogs is increasing and unless he closes his mind somewhere along the way, his knowledge continues to grow and his values change or shift. This is an evolutionary process that goes on until he either closes his mind or dies.

As one becomes more experienced with bird dogs and the mind becomes increasingly knowledgeable, more things are considered. Perhaps the person begins to think about scenting ability (does the dog have a good nose), or running gear. Later one may become more conscious and demanding about the style on point, and then add such things as speed, desire, range, etc. One's values are constantly changing. What was very important yesterday seems to be less important today and vice versa.

This accounts for the reason we have various tastes in what we want and the reason we do not all like the same things. Perhaps as we look at bird dogs, one is not necessarily right or wrong. It is just a matter of where one's values are at that particular time. A person might judge dogs at one point and have certain expectations, and then 10 years later have different expectations. Changing values is not always a result of additional knowledge.

Values shift as one listens to other respected individuals in the game and one feels he likes another perspective better than the one he currently possesses, or in group discussions where one has the opportunity to compare his own values against others. The media of judges' forums, panels, or in just sitting around a campfire with respected people discussing expectations of bird dog performance contributes a great deal to assessing and shifting of ones values.

You might better understand this process by trying this exercise. First take pencil and paper and begin to list all the attributes or things you look for in selecting a bird dog. Your list might look something like this:

Nose  
Range  
Desire  
Appearance  
Style on Birds

Let's assess the relative value of each of these attributes by placing a numeric value on each. Let's start by using a total value of 100. For example, your list might look like this:

|                |     |
|----------------|-----|
| Nose           | 20  |
| Range          | 20  |
| Desire         | 25  |
| Appearance     | 15  |
| Style on Birds | 20  |
|                | 100 |

File your list away and forget it for a year or so. Then perform the same exercise again a year later but don't refer to your old list until completing the new one. You may find your list now looks like this:

|                         |     |
|-------------------------|-----|
| Nose                    | 15  |
| Range                   | 12  |
| Desire                  | 10  |
| Appearance              | 10  |
| Style on Birds          | 10  |
| Attitude                | 5   |
| Speed                   | 15  |
| Seeks Likely Objectives | 23  |
|                         | 100 |

Now compare your new list with the one of a year ago and you can really assess the change in your values. Make a new list at the end of the third year and compare it with your two previous lists. You will most likely find that

your list has again grown, in which case all numeric values must shift. You may find nothing has been added to your list, but your numeric values changed. Or you may discover a combination of the two.

If you were able to prepare these lists every year for the first five years of your involvement with bird dogs, you would see your list changing dramatically each year. After 20 or 30 years, continue to make a list and compare it with the previous ones. You will see less dramatic changes from one year to the next. However, you will see some change in your values no matter how long you are associated with bird dogs.

Some of the things that may cause values to change are degrees of experience with such things as hunting, training more and different types of dogs, breeding bird dogs and studying genetics, and discussions with other people sharing your collective knowledge.

A hand on experience with various aspects of bird dogs and more knowledge brings on value changes. I have learned that nearly everyone has an opinion on almost everything, and it seems that the ones with the least experience are the most opinionated and most willing to express their opinions.

When sharing opinions about bird dogs, some questions you might ask regarding the foundation or basis of ones values are:

- A. Has this person trained none, one or hundreds of dogs?
- B. Has this person bought one or two dogs or bred many, many litters?
- C. Has this person worked with one or many breeds of dogs?
- D. Has this person been actively involved for 5, or 35 years?
- E. Has this person owned, trained, and competed with mediocre dogs or great winners?
- F. Has this person hunted over meat dogs, or has he hunted over topflight field trial dogs?
- G. Has this person had only gun dog experience, only allage experience, or both?
- H. Has this person trained meat dogs or National Championship caliber dogs?

The list could go on and on, but you probably have the idea by now.

#### **CHAPTER IV – MARSHALS AND BIRD PLANTING**

The best bird planters for field trials are people who have trained and hunted over many dogs. Too often in our trials, we see the youngest and most inexperienced persons planting birds. I suppose that is only natural in one sense as bird planting is not the greatest job to have at a trial. A good back course bird planter rides behind the gallery, reaching out to likely bird objectives to drop birds. If the job is done well, the person must ride a horse all day and sees little of what the dogs are doing. Not the most exciting or interesting job, but every discussion among experienced field trailers brings out the fact that this is the most important aspect of running a successful bird dog trial.

One thing I have observed over the years is that the good bird planters watch closely to see where the majority of the good dogs go and what likely objectives these dogs seek out. These are the places birds are planted and it becomes almost a game with the bird planter and the dogs. Can the planter put the birds where the dogs will find them and look good doing so?

If there is anything more disheartening to a field trial competitor than having a judge without enough experience to evaluate the merits of his dog, it is seeing a bird planter drop birds on or near the horse tracks in unlikely bird objectives. It is most disheartening to compete with your dog reaching to the limits of the course, hitting objectives, and getting beat by an inexperienced bird planter, an inexperienced judge, or by a dog with finds in the horse tracks.

It is unfortunate that we must run so many field trials throughout the country where there are no native birds and the entire trial must be run on planted birds. Planting birds in a trial is a difficult job at best and needs to be done by the most experienced people. Often times the situation appears to be so artificial that one might believe the bird found the dog rather than the other way around.

Generally speaking, judges will discount a birdless dog no matter how well it performed.

Most times judges credit a dog for a find so long as the dog points a bird regardless of where or how the dog finds the bird.

Field trial grounds are often locations where bird objectives are few and far between. Birds are placed in unlikely spots by inexperienced people. Then we say, "Judge find our best bird dog." With good dogs going birdless and mediocre dogs finding birds on horse tracks, we complain about the job done by the judges. A field trial committee may have extremely high expectations of their judges and have a rank green pea out there planting birds. Almost as bad or maybe worse, the course is laid out in such a manner that the dogs cannot look good on the course and run with the flow of the terrain. The dog must be bucking the grain of the country in order to maintain a good position in relation to the handler.

When courses are well laid out with good bird objectives around the course, good lively birds planted in the objectives, and in sufficient number, the dogs do a pretty good job separating and placing themselves. When this happens, most of the participants and the gallery agree with the placements. I have seen courses laid out so poorly that no matter where the birds are planted, a dog cannot look good. Then we see a good course laid out with good bird objectives and the birds planted everywhere except in the objectives. How disheartening to work hard developing a good field trial dog, arrive on the grounds only to see the course laid out poorly, the birds dropped in or right near the horse tracks, and judges who have never trained nor run any topflight field trial dogs.

The AKC Rule Book states a requirement for a bird planter to wear gloves. If you have watched dogs perform the scent discrimination exercise in obedience, then you start to recognize the sensitivity of the dog's nose. I doubt that even the smell of a bird can mask the scent of the human's hands when planting that bird without gloves. It is certainly disappointing to train a dog on wild birds, have that dog looking really good, and then see it point a bird in a trial without much style or class, which is probably due to some well meaning bird planter who got up that morning, shaved, put on aftershave lotion, and then forgot his gloves.

The AKC Rule Book states the following regarding Marshals: "It shall be the duty of one marshal to assist the judges and to carry out their instructions, including regulating and controlling the gallery, and seeing to it that

the gallery is kept separate from and behind the judges while the dogs are down, and shall advise the handlers and judges as to the direction and limits of the course.”

There certainly is enough to keep one person busy if they do all the things outlined. Often times the Field Trial Committee will also ask the marshal to plant birds. It would be difficult, if not impossible, for an experienced person to do all the above and ride around the countryside planting birds. Frequently we ask a new inexperienced individual to do all these things. Then handlers get upset when their dogs do not find birds in the objectives or someone is attempting to influence the judges while the marshal is off planting birds, or the gallery gets strung out across the country and someone in the gallery pulls the handler's dog off, making the dog look bad.

Inexperienced marshals seem perplexed by the decision they must make when one of the dogs finds a bird, and that is whether to stay with the pointing dog or go with the dog still running. When one analyzes what the rule book says about the marshal's duties, it appears quite clear to me that the marshal must always go with the front dog. Otherwise he won't be there to advise the handlers and judges as to the direction and limits of the course. The back handler and judge can usually see the front handler, judge, and marshal when the marshal goes on ahead. If the marshal stays back and watches the bird work of one of the two dogs, the front handler and judge have no one to help regarding direction of the course.

When the marshal is advising as to the direction of the course he can be very smooth and unobtrusive or abrasive and unhelpful. The experienced marshal usually gives directions only when required. Directions from the marshal are required on only two occasions, when the handler is wandering off course and when there is an abrupt change of direction in the course.

When there is a change of direction in the course, it is wise for the marshal to advise the handler sufficiently in advance so that the handler can smoothly maneuver his dog around the course and not have to hack his dog in and look bad.

One of the most frequent mistakes of an inexperienced marshal is to over direct the handlers, which comes from a marshal who has insufficient understanding of running dogs on a course to make them look good. The most objectionable marshal, to a handler, is the one who acts as though there is a white line drawn around the countryside depicting the course and any time a handler is six feet off the line he is advised to get back on course. I have actually heard marshals ask a handler to move six or ten feet in a particular direction in order to get back on course.

Generally once a handler has been around the course, he not only knows the direction, but also has calculated how he wants to handle his dog around that course. Sometimes though, the handler concentrates so hard on his dog that he may forget about a turn in the course and appreciates being reminded.

The best marshals are people with a lot of experience handling dogs in trials. They know what a handler needs, wants, or expects from a marshal. The inexperienced person sometimes has a tendency to over direct, or advises the handler too late to make a 90 degree left turn at the last minute when his dog is way off to the right.

Good marshals are the ones who quietly keep handlers on course, keep the gallery rounded up and in line without offending anyone. You hardly know they are there except they are always right there just when they are needed.

*By Gene Shultz*