

# Set The Bar High...Train for Master Hunter

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A friend of mine asked me if I would like to help his club at their hunt test. This was approximately a year or so before the arrival of my first German Wirehaired

Pointer. The test was my first exposure to AKC's hunt test program and an opportunity to experience it firsthand. It was also the first time to observe a few wires run at the master hunter level. The experience of seeing the master dogs run that day left a lasting impression on me. The bar had been set. From that point on I was determined to train to that level. Eventually, I entered the test program and was approved to judge these hunt tests.

The Master Hunter dog is the finished, polished gun dog. This is the dog any hunter would be "proud to own". The dog, as most know, is evaluated in six categories relative to hunting ability. They are hunting, bird finding, pointing, and trainability, honoring and retrieving. Let's briefly take a look at these categories.

The Master dog must show boldness, independence and intelligence with respect to how he/she hunts to course. The dog must have the keen desire to hunt. They must handle for their handler and must do so with a minimum of commands or hacking. I have found a positive correlation relating to this issue. Usually, if I can remember the dog's name after it has run, it means that I heard it too often on the course. The dog and handler must work as a team. Even though the dog is being evaluated, the handler's actions or errors can influence the outcome.

The category of bird finding is generally a simple one. The dog must find game. With respect to "finds" there are no set numbers. However, just like in most field trials, it's not how many but the quality of the finds. As a handler, I always wanted the "boys" to establish some bird work in the back course before entering the bird field. (Most of the tests in the East run their course with a bird field. It's usually a matter of logistics. I have been to tests that run a continuous course, which is more realistic when compared to actual hunting.) As a judge evaluating a dog, only a find in the bird field doesn't give you much to work with in developing a score in this area. No finds adversely affects the pointing score and precludes you from any possible call back situation.

Now that the dog has found game it must point it. When it comes to pointing, it must do so with intensity. The dog must point staunchly. There can't be any type of movement or creeping. The dog must remain on point throughout the entire sequence of steady to flush, wing and shot on "blanked" birds, and fall relative to the retrieve.

Trainability is a general type of category. This category typically relates to the overall performance with respect to "willingness to handle, obedience to commands and gun response". It also covers specific areas such stop to a wild flush, delayed cases and back course honoring. The next category is honoring. Simply put, the dog must honor or back it's brace mate whenever it encounters it on point. However, the dog must also honor through the retrieve (it's brace mate retrieve of shot game) in order to satisfy this requirement. Some dogs just don't like to honor. This where they will usually "blink" the pointing dog or even worse, steal point. Both are unacceptable behaviors.

The last category is retrieving. The dog must deliver shot game "promptly, tenderly and absolutely to hand". At this level, there should be no commands given or movement by the handler towards the dog. There are times where dogs place game down after picking game up initially or drop game or "mouth" game. These are all unacceptable examples. When it comes to retrieving, dogs should be taught the "trained retrieve" also referred to as the "forced fetch". Even the dog that is a natural retriever should be taught this. It's the only way to develop a truly consistent retrieve. This was something I learned at a clinic taught by a highly regarded professional trainer.

Well, these are basically the elements of the Master Hunter test. This is a test that has very little margin for error and rightfully so. When I judge these dogs I generally keep an open mind and try to judge positively. It is the judge's responsibility to give a fair and honest evaluation of the dog's performance that day. A question sometimes used in the evaluation is: Would I hunt over this dog and/or was the overall performance one of a Master Hunter? Generally, if a dog has a miscue or does something questionable it will resurface and manifest itself somewhere else on the course. Let's face it they are dogs and not machines. They will have good days and hopefully not many bad days. The better you can prepare for test (like the infinite variables and situations you can encounter) the better the probability of success. Dogs must be "proofed" during their training. If they succeed in this process they should be ready.

I wish you continued success in your training and in achieving this coveted title.