



When is handling too noisy?

# Graham Cox

**T**HAT'S A silly question I hear you say. After all, nobody likes hollering and shouting in the shooting field. It compromises the art and elegance of the sport: moreover, it's invariably a sign that something's amiss. It doesn't just 'frighten the horses', it disturbs everybody else as well.

Surely it's a 'how long is a piece of string?' question? Circumstance and conditions must have a bearing on what is considered acceptable. The phrase 'needs must' comes to mind, and no-one would expect anyone handling in a howling gale to be anything other than emphatic. Extreme conditions are, by definition, exceptional though and we need to think about the criteria that underpin concern about noisy handling in the generality of cases. Not least because the Kennel Club's *Field Trial Regulations* have, for some considerable time, included it amongst the major faults for retrievers, spaniels, pointers and setters and breeds which hunt point and retrieve. Indeed, for retrievers it has, since 2006, been extended to 'noisy or inappropriate handling'.

There are obvious aesthetic objections to noisy handling, of course, but fundamentally it is about not disturbing game. That is a concern which was evident from the very first days of field trialling. Elaborated rules did not spring into being overnight but progress was made in February 1914 when 'a large and representative gathering of gentlemen' interested in the work of field trials met at the Kennel Club to debate and frame resolutions. One of their spirited discussions concerned whether, when walking-up, the line should be stopped and a dog sent when a bird was shot, rather than adhere to the standard shooting procedure of walking on and then hunting the dog when in the vicinity of the fall. With handling techniques yet to make their appearance, the danger of disturbing game was particularly acute when a dog had not seen the fall. The good marking and control that will prevent a dog from disturbing ground was seldom in evidence.

By 1929, the *Field Trial Regulations* for various breeds consisted of only 12 lines each for retrievers and spaniels. Those for pointers and setters were, however, more extensive and included a section titled *Regulations*

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*Regarding Handling.* A person handling a dog, it said, "may speak, whistle, and work him by hand as he thinks proper; but he can be called to order by the judge or judges for making any unnecessary noise" and if he persists he may be put out of the stake. It has, from that time, been clear that acceptable handling may include the voice and the whistle and that volume which is surplus to requirements may include an excess of either or both together. Save when conditions are very adverse noisy handling is usually an indication of poor control. In present day terms it is a major fault which is likely further to detract from an indifferent performance.

Handlers, now as then, are allowed to use a combination of voice, whistle and hand signal as they think proper. Recently, however, there have been disturbing stories of judges in working tests deducting marks for the mere use of the voice: a practice unrelated to the practicalities of shooting. To suggest, for instance, that anyone who says 'leave that', or 'gone away', to make clear which of two birds down is to be sent for, has committed a 'professional foul' seems absurd. Similarly, giving a zero because the word 'no' - seen as an act of admonition - is used seems excessively punitive and, certainly, has nothing to do with noisy handling. Neither does the practice of operating a tariff whereby successive uses of a command incur escalating penalties. What's more, it's surely acceptable to send a dog with a command as well as its name. Examples could be multiplied. What they have in common is no relationship with the practicalities of shooting, still less noisy handling. They should be deplored. 🐾

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