

# Making rules and making sense

*Game shooting is sown into the fabric of a working test, but so are the rules governing it, as **Graham Cox** explains.*

**L**est we forget, one can't emphasise strongly enough that gundog working tests are exercises in simulation. Yes, they can become an end in themselves, but we should never lose sight of what gives them meaning: their relationship with the sport of game shooting. What dogs and handlers are asked to do should have some obvious connection with the skills that enhance game-finding competence. Standard situations do arise in the field and, where tests are well set, such scenarios are often replicated, and the ground available used imaginatively so the sense of a strong link is never lost.

That's the ideal. But we should keep it in mind because it is vital to have something to aim at, especially when circumstances are conspiring to make its attainment seem a remote possibility. Certainly, the Kennel Club's *J (G) Regulations for Gundog Working Tests* (GWTs) leave no doubt about the importance of the connection with game shooting. Indeed, before the introduction, which begins by making the point, there is the key statement emphasising that 'These Regulations should be read alongside and assume a familiarity with Kennel Club Field Trial Regulations'.

'Assuming a familiarity with' those J Regs involves recognising something that was a key tenet of the important review process undertaken 10 and more years ago: namely that judging often necessarily involves the exercise of discretion. Necessarily, because no rule can of itself wholly determine the

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ways in which it is applied. That is why rules so readily beget rules. Indeed, unless we are very watchful they can easily 'grow like Topsy'. The fact is that, vital as they are to the proper conduct of any sort of activity, formal rules themselves rest on wider and more fundamental understandings that may, or may not, be articulated. Judging invariably has to be more than the unthinking application of formal rules.

So D. Drew's heartfelt plea in the letters pages of the June issue that every aspect of a run in a GWT bearing on the awarding of marks by the judge is set out clearly in the rules is, though understandable, hopelessly ambitious. Obviously, things do have to be as clear and explicit as possible. But it is immersion in the culture that is the best guard against being taken by surprise: that's why familiarity is 'assumed'. The other critical guard against untoward or gimmicky demands is the good sense of those who set and judge GWTs who, hopefully, never lose sight of the practical relation to real situations in the field.

## AN ANIMATED AND PROTRACTED DEBATE

The history only underlines these priorities. The Kennel Club's initial desire to license gundog working tests was first communicated early in 1987 to the select group of gundog societies eligible to send a representative to

its field trial council. The initial reaction from the societies who read the document was overwhelmingly one of extreme scepticism, and strong opposition was voiced at the meeting of the council on April 9. In what became an often animated and protracted debate, concern was repeatedly expressed that there would almost certainly be pressure to create a Working Test Champion title, which would only be confusing. Working tests, after all, provided no possibility of examining either mouth, game sense or, except perhaps in extreme cases, a dog's propensity to give tongue. As a guide to breeding, therefore, such a title would be misleading. Such fears have, thankfully, been assuaged: though eternal vigilance is called for because the suggestion that the title be created periodically resurfaces, and the arguments that were significant almost 30 years ago remain compelling.

When, despite the acrimony involved, the matter of the Kennel Club's involvement was finally resolved in 1990, the working party that subsequently met to draw up what became the J (G) Regulations, inevitably had such considerations in mind. Hence, amongst other things, that vital preparatory statement nesting the GWT Regulations in the broader context of the J Regulations as a whole and assuming a familiarity with them.

At the same time it was recognised that GWTs would typically – and that word signalled that on occasion other arrangements might be appropriate – be judged on a points system. It was decided, moreover, to recommend that individual tests be marked out of 20. That seemed sensible because when hitherto, as had often happened, judges had marked out of 10 they had often resorted to using half marks with sometimes confusing results for stewards and scorers. That phrase 'individual tests' though, has seemingly sometimes occasioned confusion when multiple retrieves are involved. There are those who suggest it would be

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clearer if each retrieve were given a possible 20 marks.

To resolve this issue we need to return to our priorities and work through an example to demonstrate why this would be a bad idea. The 'individual test' is the test as set and explained by the judge to the competitor. If there are two retrieves involved, for instance, can they be retrieved at the discretion of the handler or must they be retrieved in the order specified by the judge? Failure to complete the test will result in a mark of zero and will exclude the individual from the awards. What might happen if we do something else?

Well, consider a familiar scenario where a test as set involves an unseen dummy on an island with a marked distraction well to the left of the dog on the land from which it is being sent. The unseen, being a 'wounded bird', has to be collected first, with the 'dead' marked retrieve gathered subsequently. Now, suppose a dog that performs consistently well across each of the four other tests set that day unaccountably fails to get to the island and returns to land on that third test. There are two possible scenarios: it has failed the test as set and is given zero, or it is allowed

nonetheless to retrieve the mark, which it does well, and is given 10 marks.

If it is awarded 10 marks for that test, its run of marks for the day are 20, 20, 10, 20, and 20 giving it a total of 90 out of a possible 100. Another dog that has run well, but perhaps without the speed and style of that dog, has the following marks: 18, 18, 16, 18 and 18 giving it a total of 88: it has been beaten by that first dog which has picked one fewer dummy. Had it been given a zero that would not have happened. And that is why, if we are to give 'game finding' its rightful priority, failure to complete the test as set must result in a zero. Awarding consolation marks for picking a distraction out of order, for instance, did and will lead to anomalous results that go against the priority the J Regs characterise as being of 'the first importance'.

### UNACCEPTABLE ANOMALIES

Of course, sticking to 20 marks for each test does cause disquiet on occasion because it seems to give no recognition to a more complicated test. The straightforward seen that begins the day is worth the same as the more demanding scenario described above. But there is no reason why 20 marks

cannot be allocated to each of the retrieves in that example to reflect its importance in the context of the day, so long as a dog which fails the test is excluded from the awards. Otherwise, what I would consider unacceptable anomalies will surely happen.

The point is sometimes made too that in both spaniel and HPR tests hunting is marked out of something other than 20. Usually it is 40, but in some Game Fair Internationals I have known it to be 60. This poses no problem because hunting is typically done more or less well and the issue of doing or not doing the test as set does not arise. The J (G) Regulations explicitly recognise that on occasion, when things are being run on quasi-field trial lines for instance, other arrangements may be appropriate. Moreover, section J (G) 5 on judging begins by stating clearly that judges 'must agree a common scoring system', which they should explain to competitors on commencement.

What matters most, surely, is that judges, organisers and competitors never lose sight of the priorities: for they provide the signposts that guide us through confusing details. There will always be those, that's for sure. 🐾