

UNDERSTANDING FIELD TRIAL RULES

By
Martha H. Greenlee ©

When I first began field trialing, I wondered about field trial rules. Where did they come from, and what was their purpose? I read and *studied Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice* from American Field Trial Clubs of America, *Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Pointing Breeds* from American Kennel Club, and *Field Trials* by William F. Brown, but no where in their pages was the origin of these rules or an explanation of their purpose. Then, one day in Arizona while quail hunting on horseback, a light came on in my head. Suddenly, it was clear where the rules came from and what their purpose was. Everything I had done that morning was in those books. Field trial rules were about dogs and hunters having success finding birds.

That morning in Arizona the dog and I left camp early. The sun had not climbed high enough in the sky to take away the chill, and a cold wind was at my back. In front of me lay two large ravines separated by a sea of yellow grass pockmarked with prickly pear cactus and mesquite bushes. This yellow sea was actually a big flat shaped like a triangle that started out wide at the bottom and narrowed as it approached the mountains. I had decided to ride along the edge of one ravine for an hour, cross, and come down the edge of the other ravine. Birds tended to feed early and late in the day on the flat, and the rest of the time they loafed in the shrubby live oaks that grew along the edges of the ravines. That year Gambles quail were very flighty. Any hacking or yelling and they would

be gone. The dog had to handle kindly, if we were to have a chance at finding birds.

A dog that works with a minimum of handling or commands must be given credit in a Gun Dog, All-Age, Limited Gun Dog or Limited All-Age Stake, whether Amateur or Open Stakes. Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice (Lake City, FL: Amateur Field Trial Clubs of America, 1988), p.37.

The dog was making big swings as he hunted for clues of quail crossing from the flat to the ravine. Sometimes, he made a cast that carried him to the far side of the flat and back to the ravine's edge. Other times, he dropped over the edge scaling his way down rocky walls and showed on the opposite side. He had just crossed the ravine heading to the flat when a single quail lifted in front of him. He stopped frozen not moving. I rode fast and jumped off the horse grabbing the gun from the scabbard. Birds started lifting all around him. I shot and missed, and we stood there together marking their flight.

A stop-to-flush is...when a dog is running downwind and runs over birds and stops mannerly. This is an unintentional flush, and the dog is not at fault or penalized. Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Pointing Breeds, (Raleigh, NC: American Kennel Club, 2005), p.34.

The birds had landed on the other side of the ravine in some live oaks. If we circled around to come in from downwind, we might pick-up some singles. Stealthily, we continued up the ravine a ways before crossing. Once across, the dog got to work. He knew how to hunt singles and worked fast and methodically

quartering into the wind. It wasn't long before he locked-up. This time I was ready and dropped the bird. He made a 180 degree turn to mark its fall, and I released him with a tap on the side to make the retrieve.

A reasonable move of a dog to mark a bird flushed after a point is acceptable, but this shall not excuse a break or delayed chase. Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice, p.36.

Not wanting to put more pressure on the covey, we crossed the ravine again and continued working along the edge towards the mountains. The landscape was changing, and smaller ravines began to appear that joined the big one that we were following. I hadn't had the dog for a while and got out the tracking collar receiver that was hooked to the saddle. The beeps told me he was on point. It took a while to find him, and when I finally got to him, he was standing in a shallow ravine pointing near a clump of live oaks. He was flagging and glanced up. I tooted my whistle, and he took off like a rocket racing down the rocky ditch and slammed on point near another clump.

Many times a dog will flag when he has been on point a long time and his game has run off and left him. This flagging indicates that the dog wants to relocate his game and it is not a serious fault. Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice, p. 40.

We had been out almost an hour. After taking a moment to water and rest him, we crossed the narrowing flat and started down the edge of the other ravine. This area was where we had had good bird work earlier in the week, so it wasn't long

before the dog was acting birdy. He pointed near some mesquite bushes, but he released himself. The birds were probably running. He pointed again released himself and continued these actions for a couple of minutes working parallel to the ravine. Then suddenly, he took off in a straight line away from the ravine and disappeared over a low rise. I rode up, and he had a dozen Gambles pinned against a rocky outcropping. He stood solidly for flush and shot.

A dog which independently decides to relocate in order to get on better terms with his game is performing acceptably. However, once the dog establishes point and the handler has dismounted and the flushing attempt is under way, the dog should not move or break point until ordered to relocate by the handler. William F. Brown, *Field Trials* (Chicago: American Field Publishing Co, 1987), p. 48-49.

We were getting closer to camp, and the terrain was widening. The dog started working birds again, and this time he jammed on point in the middle of the grassy flat. The birds were probably out feeding, but he released himself at my approach. He moved and stopped a couple of times, then circled a big mesquite bush and froze. Dismounting, I flushed a tightly grouped covey located right in front of him.

Dogs that refuse to maintain a staunch point on foot scent, but move on so they will always have the body scent in their nose, are to be rewarded for locating their birds accurately. They are preferred to a dog that holds fast to his original point on the foot scent, even if the birds move beyond the reach of his nose. Here, particularly, does a dog demonstrate his ability to

match wits with the bird. Accurate location of game is ever highly desirable. Quickness is a plus. The astute handler permits his dog to certify exact location without undue coaching. Brown, Field Trials, p.19.

As we continued on, the horse trailer came into view. We both needed a break, and stopped at the windmill that was pumping water into a circular cement cattle trough. The dog jumped in the trough and lay down in the cold water panting, drinking, and gagging, and I stayed on the horse gazing at the windmill's metal blades slowly rotating in the wind. It was at that moment a light came on in my head; when I suddenly realized that what we had done that morning was what field trial rules were all about.

Since that day, I look at field trial rules differently. Bill Brown said it best when he wrote, "the object of field trials is the promotion and development of the high-class bird dog. It is a means of enjoying the great out-of-doors sport of bird hunting in its most aesthetic fashion." The answer to my questions about where field trial rules came from and what was their purpose was simple. The origin and purpose of these rules was bird hunting. To understand field trial rules, all I really needed to do was take a bird dog hunting.