

The Kennel Club

Starting out - A Beginner's Guide to Field Trials and Gundog Working Tests

What are Field Trials?

Field Trials have developed to test the working ability of Gundogs in competitive conditions. Trials resemble, as closely as possible, a day's shooting in the field and dogs are expected to work with all manner of game, from rabbits and hares, to partridges and pheasants.

Many of our best loved breeds were traditionally developed to help man in hunting. Labrador Retrievers gathered game in the field; Cocker Spaniels flushed and retrieved game; Pointers and Setters ranged over the fields helping us seek out birds and rabbits for the table. A great many still help us in shooting and hunting today. Field Trials are very popular, attract hundreds of competitors and are still very much part of our countryside sports. If you have a love and understanding of the countryside and like to see dogs working as they were intended to, this friendly and relaxed sport may be just what you are looking for.

If you want to own a dog capable of performing at a day's shooting you are more likely to succeed if it comes from working stock.

Some dogs which have been bred for the show scene, or simply as pets, may have lost much of their working and hunting instinct, which is vital in working Gundogs. You will need to be dedicated to developing your dog as a working animal as, not only will it require a lot of training, working Gundogs can also be more demanding than a pet, or show dogs. They need plenty of exercise off the lead and their minds need to be kept active by working in the field.

Show Gundog Working Certificate

A Show Gundog that has won certain awards in the show ring can also enter for a [Show Gundog Working Certificate](#) if it is able to demonstrate a good standard of working ability relevant to breed.

Finding out about the sport

Before you decide whether you want to get involved with this sport you should find out as much as possible about countryside sports from a number of sources.

If your dog comes from working stock, the breeder should be able to advise you about how to start to develop your dog into a working Gundog and introduce you to other people in your area with similar interests.

There are many large Game and Country Fairs held all around the country every year which are well worth attending if you want to find out more.

There are usually working Gundog demonstrations at these Fairs and you should take time not only to watch the displays, but also to talk to those people involved and ask their advice.

The Kennel Club also sends a stand to some of the larger Fairs and the staff are more than happy to discuss the sport with you and help to clarify any rules and regulations you need help with.

There are plenty of specialist publications which are filled with articles and tips about training your Gundog and the role of the dog owner and dog in the countryside. Some titles include 'The Shooting Times', 'Shooting Gazette' and 'The Field'. These magazines also have sporting calendars which list when and where Game and Country Fairs are being held.

The [Kennel Gazette](#) also features articles about Field Trials and working Gundogs, as well as providing the dates of forthcoming Field Trials.

Training

If you decide that this sport is for you, you can begin the process of training.

You should remember that not only must your dog be fit and healthy to do a day's work, but you need to be as well. You will need to be fairly robust to be able to tramp across some of the rough terrain encountered on some country shoots! Breeds of Gundog fall into four groups:

- Retrievers and Irish Water Spaniels
- Sporting Spaniels other than Irish Water Spaniels
- Pointers and Setters

- Breeds which Hunt, Point and Retrieve

The training you do must bring out the traditional working abilities for each category of Gundog in the shooting field.

The first step is to join a Field Trial society or gundog club who can offer a range of training opportunities throughout the summer months.

The Kennel Club will be able to help you find the most suitable society near to you. Field Trial Societies will be able to help you with specialist Field Trial training and can suggest trainers who may be willing to train you to the gun on a one to one basis. Training a working Gundog is really a sport in itself and can take many years of hard work, developing a good rapport with your dog to create a dog capable of working in the field.

Field Trial Societies may organise members' competitions and training assessments which are designed to develop your dog's ability and help with your training technique. These are helpful as your dog should learn to work surrounded by other people and dogs, as it would do out in the field. Clubs may also publish newsletters and magazines, and organise a range of social events.

Joining Field Trial Societies is also the only way you will be able to enter gundog competitions. Over 600 Field Trials and many Gundog Working

Tests are held every year, and they are nearly all over-subscribed.

Preference is always given to club members so, if you want to go into competition you will have to join several clubs to stand a chance of getting a run.

Once you have joined a Field Trial Society you should ask to attend as a guest at one or two Trials to see the standard required of dogs working in the Field, and also to try to pick up training tips from top handlers in competition.

The majority of Field Trials are held in the autumn and winter during the shooting season, with Pointer and Setter "circuits" in April/May and August/September.

Gundog Working Tests (GWTs)

Most Gundogs aren't ready to work in competition for at least two years and the first sort of competition you will probably enter will be a Gundog Working Test. These competitions are for members of the organising club only.

They are designed to further good, sound, Gundog work and encourage dogs' natural working ability, but do not involve shooting live game. Work is done with dummies, and these friendly competitions are a natural extension of the training you will already be doing with your dog.

Gundog Working Tests are designed to suit the different working abilities of the three Gundog groups, Spaniels, Retrievers and breeds which Hunt, Point and Retrieve.

Breeds

Retrievers

At a Field Trial dogs will be required to be steady by the handler whilst being shot over until commanded to quest for dead or wounded game, from land or water, and retrieves tenderly to hand. (J(B)1.9)

At GWTs Retrievers are tested on their game finding ability and the speed and directness of the retrieve. Judges will be looking for quick pick ups and fast returns, natural nose and marking ability, quietness in handling, control, drive and style.

Spaniels

Spaniels will be judged on how well they quarter the ground at a Field Trial, hunting for game and other quarry species, to be steady to flush, shot and fall and to retrieve tenderly to hand on command. (J(C)1.)

At tests exercises are set to try and assess a Spaniel's retrieving and game finding abilities using seen and hidden dummies. The judges will also be looking for good directional control.

Pointers and Setters

At a Field Trial dogs shall be required to quarter ground systematically with pace and style in search of gamebirds, to point gamebirds, to be steady to flush and shot and, where applicable, to fall. Dogs should not be gun shy. The dog should work its point out freely, on command, without the handler either touching the dog or moving in front of it.

(J(D)1.)

There are no GWTs for Pointers and Setters.

HPRs

At HPR Field Trials, dogs shall be required to quarter ground systematically in search of quarry, to point game, to flush on command, to be steady to flush, shot and fall, and to retrieve tenderly to hand on command from land and water.

(J(E)1.)

It is difficult to assess pointing through artificial tests and there are limitations to how this can be done in a Gundog Working Test. HPR breeds will be tested and judged on their quartering, hunting and retrieving skills in similar ways to the Retrievers and Spaniels.

Entering a Field Trial

When you have been a member of a Field Trial Society for some time and been attending training sessions and Gundog Working Tests, you will be advised when your dog is ready for competition. Field Trial Societies send schedules to all their members before a Trial and when you and your dog are ready you should complete the entry form and return it to the Field Trials Secretary.

The schedule will tell you when and where the Trial is taking place and that Stakes are scheduled. Field Trials can consist of one or more Stakes, which are separate competitions at that Trial and can be limited by the age or previous experience and wins of the dog. You should study the schedule carefully to ensure that you enter the correct Stake for your dog.

It is also important to complete the entry form as legibly and accurately as possible; your dog's registered details should be exactly as they appear on the Kennel Club registration certificate and your name and address should be clearly marked to assist the Field Trial Secretary in advising competitors of the draw. The schedule will also tell you by what date your entry form should be returned to the Trial organisers, known as the 'closing date'.

After the closing date for entries the Society Committee will conduct a draw to pick the competitors for the Trial. As has already been mentioned, Field Trials are usually over-subscribed so you may not be lucky enough to get a run the very first time you apply for entry. Different types of Trial allow different numbers of competitors and the Trial Secretary will advise all entrants of their placing in the draw. If there are only 20 places available, and you are number 32, you will not get a run unless 12 people in front of you drop out. With so many people keen to compete you must advise the Trial organisers immediately if you have to drop out of a Trial to give another competitor a chance to run in the Trial.

Preparation

There's a great deal to think about before you go to a Field Trial. Firstly, you must dress appropriately. You should wear plenty of layers of warm clothing, and wellington boots and a water and wind proof coat are a must. It's also important that your clothes are dark, or in neutral tones - bright coloured garments may startle game.

With the vagaries of the British weather you are well advised to take a change of clothing with you, so that you are not faced with a cold and damp car journey home.

You should also pack the food and drink you are going to need during the course of the day. Sometimes Judges do not stop for lunch, particularly when there are reduced daylight hours in the autumn and winter, so you should think about things you can eat in the field if you cannot wait until a day's competition is over.

Field Trials usually mean a long car journey so think about your dog's needs too - a good strong travelling box and plenty of water will make its trip comfortable. Often working dogs are not fed before a day's work but you should remember to pack your dog's bowls and some dog food as you may not return home from a Trial until late in the evening.

Although the Schedule and draw will tell you where the Trial is going to take place you should also take a good map with you. Field Trials are usually signposted when you get near to the meeting point but it can often be very difficult to track down exactly which field you need to be heading for.

Many people choose to travel the day before the Trial and stay in bed and breakfast. If you do decide to do this, always double check that the management are happy to take dogs and that there is somewhere suitable to exercise your dog.

At the Trial

You should allow yourself plenty of time to reach the meeting point. If you are late, one of the reserves may get the

chance to run in your place and all your preparation and long journey will have been wasted.

Once you have found the meeting point you should let the Field Trial Secretary know that you have arrived. They will mark you as present on the card, which lists all the people and dogs taking part in the Trial, and give you a numbered arm band which you must wear throughout the Trial. This is the means by which you will be easily identified during the Trial.

Before the Trial starts, a briefing will be held to introduce the host (if present), the gamekeeper and the guns, to explain how the day will run and any special instructions. Competitors must always attend this briefing both for their own interest and to be courteous to the Trial organisers and host. Field Trial Societies rely on the generosity of land owners to host Trials and keep the sport alive. The host not only provides the land to hold the Trial and the game, but also the guns, the beaters, the game carriers and the gamekeeper. It is vital, therefore, that you treat the countryside with respect and are always courteous to the estate staff.

After the briefing, everyone will either walk or drive to where the Stakes are to take place. Safety is a very important consideration and spectators, and dogs and owners not competing, must stay behind a red flag carried by one of the Stewards. This ensures that everyone stays out of the way of the guns and that people do not stray onto parts of the estate they are not meant to.

During each Stake the Judges will ask each dog to work a number of times under various conditions. The Kennel Club's Regulations set out in detail the manner in which the Trial should proceed. Competitors should make themselves familiar with the Regulations well before they enter their first Field Trial. Judges will be looking closely at how your dog works, making a note of all its strengths but also of its major faults.

There are also a number of eliminating faults in each Stake such as whining and barking, hard mouth, running in and chasing, failing to find game that another dog can find, and changing game whilst retrieving. There are different eliminating faults for each Stake and handlers should be well aware of these, both in training and in competition.

If your dog does commit an eliminating fault it is excluded from further participation in the Trial. This can be very disappointing if it occurs on your dog's first run but you should lose with good grace and enjoy the rest of the day's shooting. It is considered very poor form to leave a Trial early simply because your dog has not performed to the best of its ability. Always thank the Judges and Trial Secretary before you leave.

Handling your dog

Attending your first Field Trial may cause your dog to behave differently than it does in training. Young dogs in particular can be bothered by crowds and if this is the case you can move a little way from other competitors and officials. You must, however, let the Steward know what you are doing and why. You will not be penalised for controlling your dog in this manner. In fact, it is a good idea to tell your Judge and Steward that you are competing in your first Field Trial as they will make their directions very clear and offer you help.

Working Gundogs should be kept under good control at all times, both whilst waiting to compete and during the Stakes. You should always be aware of how your dog is reacting and what it is doing. If it does misbehave, you should never handle your dog harshly, or use punitive correction during a Trial. This could land you in trouble with the Kennel Club and also indicates that you have not trained your dog properly. All dogs should be trained and worked using plenty of encouragement.

If for any reason you become aware that your dog is not going to work well – we all have our off days – you should ask the Judge's permission to withdraw. This is a courtesy that must be observed and ensures that the Judges' and Stewards' time is not wasted.

Leaving the Trial

At the end of the Trial there will be a number of presentations that all competitors are expected to stay for. The host, gamekeeper and guns will be thanked; four awards for each Stake will be presented, together with any Certificates of Merit other dogs may have earned; the overall winner will thank the Judges and make any other comments about the Trial.

So, as you can see, there are many exciting and interesting challenges on the long road from basic training to Field Trial competition. Careful preparation at every stage is vital. Put the effort in and you'll find it an enormously rewarding process.

Awards

For an explanation of the Field Trial Awards please click on the link: [Field Trial Awards](#). Gundog Working Test awards are not recorded by the Kennel Club.

For further information on all aspects of Field Trials and Working Gundogs please contact either [Hilary Gould](#), Field Trials department on 020 7518 1059, or [Anne Greeves](#) on 01485 600918.

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