

Field Trial Handling Tips and Techniques

1. Keep track of what brace the class is on, do not bring your dog out too early as he may get tired, too close to running and you may not have control. You need to figure out how far in advance to bring your dog out to the field to make him comfortable in this setting.
2. When the brace ahead of yours is running, you should be getting ready. Find your bracemate and consider introducing the two dogs. Put your slip lead on your dog (under the collar or through the "O" or "D" ring on the collar) and remove and pocket your regular lead. Move up with your bracemate to within hearing distance of the field marshal.
3. While waiting for your rabbit, stay as close to the beaters as possible without putting your dog in a position to see the rabbit when it is flushed from cover and do your best to keep your dog under control and quiet. If your dog is barking loudly it can be disruptive to the other dog and handler, and neither of you will be able to hear when a "Tally Ho" is called.
4. Stay close to your bracemate so you can come up to the line together. You don't want to get to the line and have to hold your dog back while waiting for the other handler or for the judges to get there. If you pull the dog off the line or restrain it for too long, your dog may think that you are correcting it and that you don't want it to follow that rabbit.
5. Be courteous to your bracemate, both handlers should try to come to the line together. Don't lag back making your bracemate wait for you. The longer you take getting to the line, the more the scent is going to dissipate or blow away.
6. After "Tally Ho" has been called try to determine if there is a preferred route to take up to the starting point. You don't want to cross the line you are going to be running and if more than one rabbit is flushed you don't want to distract your dog by walking it across a line that it will not be running. For this reason it is sometimes preferable to pick up your dog as you approach the line and hold them until you receive the judges' instructions regarding where the rabbit started and what direction the rabbit took.
7. When you arrive at the release point, keep your dog quiet so you and your bracemate will be able to hear the judges' instructions for the start. Relax, watch and listen to the judges' instructions. If you do not understand the judges' instructions then ask questions.
8. Never place your dog on the line facing the direction from which the rabbit came. If the rabbit was sitting just before bolting, putting your dog in that spot and then trying to get him turned around to go in the correct direction is difficult and not to your dog's best advantage. Instead get as close to the starting point as possible and set your dog down in the direction that the rabbit headed.
9. Each handler should attempt to stay on either side of the line with the dogs on the line between you. Try not to walk on the line. One or both of the dogs may circle back and need to work that section of line again.
10. Try to focus your dog's attention. Encourage your dog to hunt or sniff but don't work him up to a verbal frenzy. If you talk to your dog constantly, then he may begin to "tune" you out and not hear any of your commands. Once the dogs are released, no further commands are permitted unless the judges specifically request you to call or pick up your dog.
11. Don't rush your dog especially on paths. He should be pulling you at the time of release, you don't want to be dragging him. You want your dog's nose to engage before his feet. Give your dog a chance to commit to the line before releasing him.
12. A line is formed by at least two points. Don't release your dog at the first sign that it recognizes a rabbit track. Your dog will have a better sense of direction if he picks up a couple of tracks in succession before you release him.

13. It is not always best to be the first dog released on the line. Watch for clues from your dog that he recognizes and is focused on the line before releasing him. However, if your bracedmate has already been released ahead of you on the line, then don't release your dog until you have moved past the other handler. You don't want to release your dog on a part of the line that the other handler may have already walked on.
14. If you recognize an obstacle or an area of difficult scenting near the start (a patch of dry leaves or barren earth or a fork in the path close to the starting point) and can get the dogs past it before releasing them you should strongly consider doing so unless the judges indicate otherwise.
15. Some judges will ask you to keep the dogs on their slip leads until a certain point on the line. They may want you to go past a lane or some other distraction before releasing. This is important! Releasing your dog too soon could send it in the wrong direction.
16. If you are told by the judges to release your dog at a certain point on the line make sure that you release the slip lead when the dog is pulling in the right direction. When a dog is pulling he will sometimes swing back and forth across the line and will usually head off in the direction that he is aiming when the slip lead is released. To release the slip lead just let go of one end and allow the dog to move away from you. Don't pull or yank on the slip lead as you may pull the dog in the wrong direction and draw him off of the line.
17. If your slip lead becomes tangled during the release, just let it go. It will either slip off by itself or it will stay on during the dog's entire run. If the line remains tangled and impedes the dogs progress, calmly ask the judges if you can free the dog. Trying to yank the slip lead off when it is tangled can be interpreted by the dog as a correction and will give the dog the message that he is not doing the right thing.
18. After releasing your dog, stand still or quietly step back away from the line. You can follow the judges if they move out to watch the dogs but always stay behind them and to the side.
19. Try to keep track of your dog. When the judges instruct you to pick up your dog do so as quickly as possible, since the judges may wish to restart the dogs on the same line or they may want to run the brace on another rabbit. If you think that you will need help catching your dog, make arrangements for assistance before you run your dog. Introduce your dog to these people in advance if possible, so they can help you without scaring your dog in the process.
20. You and your dog may not leave the field until the judges call for the next brace. If your dog is called back for second series and beyond, then you may not leave the field until instructed by the judges or until a "Field trial" is called.

The two mistakes seen most often are handlers not requesting or judges not providing clear directions and handlers releasing their dogs too quickly!

Suggestions contributed by: Lois Ballard, Brian Gunn, Ken Hagmueller, Carrie Hamilton, Sandi Myers, and Patt Nance.