

Ten Suggestions for AKC Hunting Tests Handlers

- Perry Dlugie and Bob Duke

Know the rules Understand what the AKC objectives are for a Junior Hunter. You can order a Hunt Test Rules booklet online or download a copy from the AKC website, [Regulations for AKC Hunting Tests for Pointing Breeds](#). This will help you understand what the judges are looking for when they are scoring your dog. Know what is required from your dog and yourself in order to receive a qualifying score. Know what is expected at the senior and master level also.

Know the course Know where the start line is and the route the handlers and their dogs are expected to take. Is there a bird field or is it a continuous course? What are the boundaries of the bird field? The field should be marked by orange flags. Is there water for your dog on the course or do you need to bring your own? Are there any roads or wooded areas that can pose a safety hazard to your dog? Is the course muddy enough to require rubber boots? Ask handlers who walked earlier braces about the field conditions.

Basic obedience Is your dog under control? The come or here command, and whoa are probably the two most important things you can teach your dog for keeping her safe and under control. Does your dog respond reliably in the yard, or in the park? If not, she probably won't respond out in a field saturated with scent from other dogs and birds. Dogs don't like being yelled at any more than we do. Join a basic obedience class to develop a healthy relationship with your dog.

Know the game Which direction is the wind coming from? Work your dog so the wind carries the scent of the birds to him. Work quickly to bring him downwind (with the wind at his back), then turn him upwind (wind in his face) and work the field slowly (quartering) to give him a better chance at picking up the scent of a bird in front or to the side of him. Generally in a hunt test the birds are set in objectives such as tall tufts of grass or near small bushes. Teach your dog to recognize and hunt these objectives as well as out in the open. Although there may be previously flushed birds in the treelines, these can be difficult areas to work. Stay within the boundaries of the bird field.

Ask advice Ask the judges what they thought about your run. They have seen countless dogs and handlers, both good and bad. Most judges have finished one or more dogs themselves. They are happy to give suggestions on training or how to improve your handling skills. If you have questions on how your dog was scored, be tactful, not confrontational.

Be quiet Let your dog work. Know your dog. Learn to recognize when she is on scent. Constant hacking or over handling of your dog just teaches her to ignore you and will lower your scores. Your dog should know that she is out there to "find the bird" you don't need to keep reminding her. Have fun. Enjoy being outdoors and watching your dog do what she was born to do. Life is good.

Train for the next level Train for seniors, compete in juniors. Train for masters, compete in seniors. Get some books and DVDs on pointing dog training. Join a club that has member training days. You'd be surprised at how much you can accomplish with just 20 minutes a day of training. "Whoa" is arguably the most important field command for a pointing dog. Practice whoa during your evening walks. Work on steadying your dog or the forced retrieve in the family room while watching TV. Keep it positive and fun.

Get your dog on birds If you don't have access to live birds for training improvise with wings or scent. You can get wings from a friend that hunts or purchase them online or at an outdoors store. Wrap the wing around a training dummy and hide it in objectives similar to what your dog would see in a bird field. He will get the idea and track the scent of the wings.

Watch advanced dogs and handlers Come early and spend time at the edge of the field with the gunners and bird planters. Many of them are experienced handlers who have competed and finished dogs of their own. Don't hesitate to ask questions. Watch the higher levels to see what you should be training toward.

Get involved Volunteer in advance to help at club events. Come out to club training days. The more you put into being a member of your club, the more you'll get in return. Volunteering for club events will give you a more complete perspective of what goes into running a successful event. It will give you better access to members with a wealth of knowledge and experience that can help you and your dog achieve the highest level of success!