

THE ROVING REPORTER

By Art Rodger

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ART & AFC TURTLECREEK MISTY MORNING

Art Rodger, a lifetime hunter (switching from Brittany to English springer spaniels in 1971) and veteran field trialer, served on the Board of the ESSFTA (Parent Club) for 6 years, 4 years as ESSFTA Vice President, Field. Art was publisher of *Spaniels In The Field* for 11 years. He continues to move toward "full" retirement with a changed role as Roving Reporter. His phone is 513-489-2727, E-mail arodger@cinci.rr.com

Thirty five years ago I began running English Springer Spaniel field trials in the Denver area. I was all excited with the progress of my first springer, Delbert, who had placed in a couple of puppy stakes and was now competing in the Amateur stake. My long time hunting partner from Wisconsin (with whom I had spent many years hunting pheasants, grouse and ducks behind my Brittany) had just moved to Denver and I was anxious to show him the great hunting ability of the field bred English Springer Spaniel. I invited him to our local field trial and he spent the whole day in the gallery.

On the way home he was strangely quiet so I popped the question. "Well, what do you think about springers now", expecting a glowing response. Don replied, "I don't know how to respond to that question---the whole thing is so fake. You spend the whole day out in a winter wheat field that has been cut, following a course where no self respecting wild bird would be found, defined by hundreds of bicycle flags and expect two judges to pick the best four hunting dogs. What a waste of time". I, of course, spent many hours through the following years trying to convert him but Don kept talking about those bicycle flags and all his future dogs turned out to be labs. Does this happen often? I don't know but it might have some impact on why we see so many labs and pointers around.

How can we make our sport more realistic? Better, bigger field trial grounds with at least one series run

in tough hunting cover and no bull rings we run over and over and over? Sure but getting new, better cover is time consuming, costly and sometimes impossible in parts of the country. However, there is one thing that any club can do before their next trial ----- RETHINK THEIR FLAG POLICY.

What in the world is a flag policy? Probably the persons who stake your course agree on the ground to cover and place stakes 40 to 50 yards apart (and some times 30 yards for the third series if time is running out---but that's a different problem). That lets everyone know where to run the dog(s), clearly defines the centerline and probably tells the bird planters where to put the birds. What's wrong with that?

- 1. Making the center line so well defined makes it more like a concrete divider and can cause a new, or nitpicking veteran judge to disqualify an otherwise beautifully performing dog for a relatively small infraction. OK, you can say with judging seminars and proper selection of judges, it shouldn't happen---but it happened 35 years ago when I started running trails and it can happen today.*

2. *It looks artificial and conflicts with our claim that our trials truly simulate real hunting. Perhaps no big deal, but it did influence my friend Don and it could influence others.*
3. *By far the biggest problem is the way it impacts the dog work and judging of field trials. In my judgment 90 % plus planters place the birds on or near the flags. That's the way it's been and a video on bird planting says that's the way it should be, a position I disagree with. Watch the Pro or savvy Amateur slow up or sometimes stop if his/her dog doesn't quickly pick up bird scent when approaching the proper flag. Some handlers look like their feet are stuck in wet concrete. Sure, how the dog is handled depends on the dog's nose, the scenting conditions, the wind and the cover but knowing where the bird is located is artificial and should be discouraged.*

What's the solution to this problem? Here are some suggestions.

1. *Use a minimum number of flags to define the course. On a level field this might mean spreading them out to 150 or more yards---the key word here is within handler vision.*
2. *On a hilly course stake only at the hilltop and bottom.*
3. *On a curvy course stake only frequently enough to roughly define the curve*
4. *In extremely heavy, high cover or woods stake only to keep flags within handler's vision.*
5. *Rarely plant a bird at the flag---stagger distance between birds---occasionally plant two birds close together, just like they would be in a real hunt.*

One might say by taking away the centerline barrier you might occasionally have two dogs get into a fight. I say who wants a title hung on a dog that you would be afraid to take hunting with your buddy's dog? Judges discretion would have to be used here but that's what judges are for.

Many years ago I judged a trial out east and when we came out of the clubhouse I asked, "where do we start?"

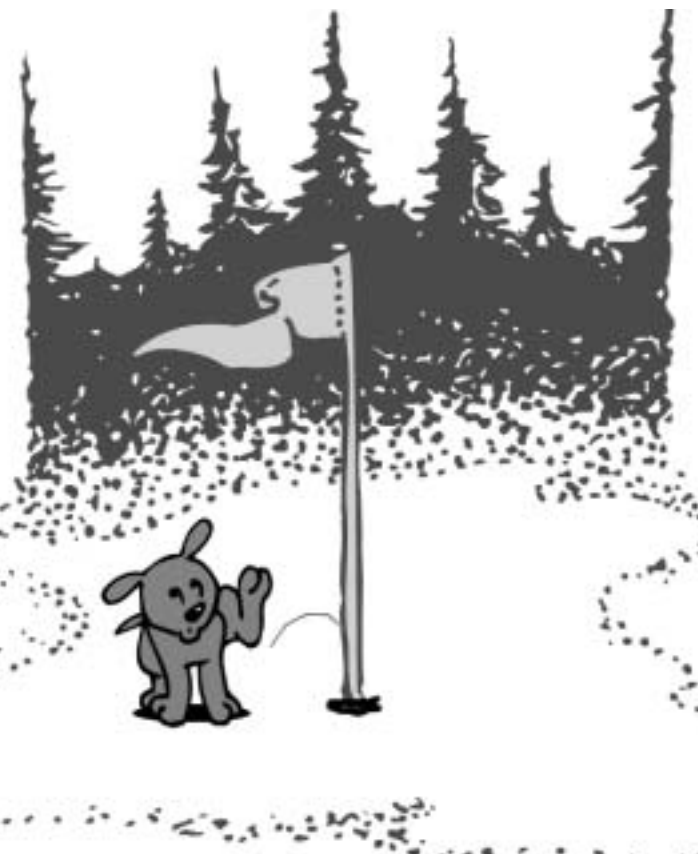
"Right here" was the answer.

"Where are the flags?"

"We don't use flags. You just go down to that old dead tree, turn right and through the tree lines, etc./etc."

It turned out to be really fun. More like actual hunting, with NO artificial flags and NO clearly defined centerline (with NO dog fights!!).

There's one other interesting thing about that trial that I uncovered when reading my judging notes from the 1981 trial to refresh my memory. I sent a dog on a retrieve and he pinpointed the bird, picked it up, carried it back to



within 15 yards of us, put it down, refused to pick it up again, lifted his leg-----and peed all over it !!! How does this tie into this article suggesting reducing the number of flags? Check out this sketch expressing one dog's opinion of flags!!! Sorry folks, this isn't a field bred English springer spaniel. I spent all morning last week in 100 degree heat to get "Dickens" to pee on a flag but he wouldn't cooperate.

Getting back to spreading out flag placement, it's always tough to change what we have done for years. You can always come up with reasons why it will or won't work. But actual experience is really the only way to check it out. Why not try it? No rule change is necessary. Tell us how it worked or didn't work for you and we'll pass along your opinions in our next issue.