

FORWARD to
STANDARDS AND GUIDELINES FOR THE NGSPA ALL-AGE CHAMPION
July 1, 2019

The NGSPA Board recognizes the importance of the All-Age GSP to our breeding programs and the long-term trend which tracks the continual increase in the performance levels of our breed. All-Age dogs are the fastest growing segment of the NGSPA, both in numbers of dogs being entered, and the number of Championships being held. The NGSPA has encouraged the addition of Amateur All-Age stakes to our Championships and the number over a four year period has grown from none to possibly 5 in 2019. In June, 2019, the Board approved the first Amateur All-Age National Championship to be held in 2020.

The Board has realized that many in the NGSPA community have deep experience with GSP shooting dogs, but have never owned, handled, trained or hunted an all-age GSP. There are essential differences and it is important for the GSP community to recognize, understand, and appreciate them.

Our Standard is not fundamentally new. It is rooted in long-observed practices compiled and memorialized in the *AFTCA Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice*, revised in 1988 and first published in 1948. These standards are comprehensive and ours is intended as a supplement and not a replacement for them. We encourage every field trialer and judge to read them thoroughly from time to time and refer to them often. All of us tend to develop preferences and biases of performance, and over time they may become divergent from these time-honored Standards. It is important to periodically reexamine our predilections and ensure that they are within Standard.

In compiling this All-Age Standard we have sought the advice and perspective of people with “All-Age experience”: handlers, judges and trainers from both the NGSPA and American Field communities. We have identified those issues most relevant to the All-Age dog, and added commentary to enlighten and inform, but not alter the AFTCA Standards.

For convenience the gender of people and dogs herein is expressed in the masculine form. The NGSPA recognizes the outstanding contribution of our female judges, handlers, and scouts, and of course our phenomenal female dogs.

CONTRIBUTORS and REVIEWERS:

GSP Community: Tom Davis, Robert Reynolds, DVM, Eldon Hongo, Dan DiMambro, Joe Amatulli, Chad Inderman, Ray Larrondo, Mike Patrick, Keith Richardson

American Field Community: Dale Bush, Hunter Wilcox, Jerry Reed, Douglas Vaughn, Jamie Daniels, Larry and June McConnell, Richard Robertson, Jr.

Keith Richardson
 President, NGSPA

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The NGSPA All-Age Champion must demonstrate the requisite qualities of the All-Age class. These standards apply to the All-Age National Champion, the Invitational Champion, and Regional and Species All-Age Champions equally. No distinction is to be made between Open and Amateur stakes. This

document deals with the standards and guidelines which apply to the All-Age GSP as a distinct class from the Shooting Dog. It does not cover guidelines and practices common to both. Please refer to the *Guidelines to Field Trial Procedure and Judicial Practice* on www.aftca.org under Clubs and Trials, or request a bound book. You will find it an invaluable guide for all competitors and judges of field trials. Some important excerpts are quoted below referring to "*The AFTCA Guide*."

GENERAL DISTINGUISHING QUALITIES

The AFTCA Guide (23) states: "The familiar capsule description of the all-age dog, attributed to old-time trainer Jim Avent, declares that he (or she) is a dedicated hunter of upland game birds which 'runs off-but not quite'. The all-age dog is a free spirit and fills up all the available country (plus a little) in a bold and sometimes reckless manner, yet ultimately acknowledges the control exerted by his handler and courses to the front in such a pattern as to maintain periodic, suitable contact with the handler. The really intelligent and accomplished all-age dog exhibits the knack of "showing" at strategic, distant, forward points...." "He may frequently pass from view, only to show again after a lapse of time, or to be discovered by handler or scout pointing game".... "He should exude animation and happiness with the task at hand," and run with a ground-grabbing gait that is pleasing to watch.

"ALL-AGE" APPLICATION TO COURSE

The All-Age dog uses the wind and terrain to his advantage as he hunts his way out to the extreme limits of the course in an efficient ground-covering manner. Consistently to the front, he maintains remote often unseen contact with his handler by quick glances and use of his acute hearing. His keen nose allows him to hunt quickly past likely cover without slowing for a methodical search.

He often bypasses off-line objectives that a shooting dog may search. This must be distinguished from line-running without apparent purpose which is a fault. Taking a long edge of good cover at speed and disappearing to the distant front is not to be considered line running, but is most often an intelligent, efficient move, while breaking off of that line is normally not desirable.

PACE AND ADHERANCE TO COURSE

The AFTCA Guide (19) says: "A judge should ride at a reasonable pace and be in a reasonable place to see...." "A judge is not obligated to follow a handler at all times, but he should ride and take advantage of the terrain, such as a hill, to see what the dog is doing. Laying back with the gallery and following in horse tracks on a course is not an acceptable performance of a judge." "A judge must keep foremost in his mind the selection of the best dog or dogs to win the trial." The judge's pace and course of travel is secondary and must never become an impediment to his search for the best dog.

The AFTCA Guide (25) says: "The handler must show his dog to the judges while proceeding at a reasonable pace and at a reasonable distance in front of the field trial party." Excessive wild riding is not permitted, and while the perfect picture may be to maintain a 20 to 50-yard distance in front of the judges, this is often too restrictive for the All-Age handler whose dog is often "on-the-edge" of "running-off but not quite." He often needs to handle more aggressively than he would in a shooting dog stake. To show his dog may require him to speed up and ride off path to gain an obvious vantage point or to cover one side of a wide and long field while his scout covers the other. The judge will evaluate if the dog is making independent moves or is being pushed around the course. The handler is to show his dog without becoming the "show."

The movement of judges and handlers may be better described by talking about "rhythm" rather than "pace." The field trial is a moving, flowing, changing event with each brace, and judges' efforts to adhere

to a fixed pace of travel and a fixed course may be at odds with the natural rhythm of this flow. The speed of travel ebbs and flows. It may slow to allow the dog to hunt an especially challenging area such as a rocky, brushy hillside, and it may speed up as everyone is approaching a known lookout or a dog on point, then it may become moderate as the course passes through a wide and long bottom. A judge may break off the course to gain a view point or a different perspective. He is not bound to a fixed path. Always there is the excitement of being carried along by the magnificence of a championship All-Age performance.

SCOUTING THE ALL-AGE DOG

The AFTCA Guide says (24,25): “The scout’s sole duty is to locate the dog...” “If the dog is not pointing, he is to heel the dog via the shortest route possible in regaining the front.” The All-Age scout has a challenging job. He is to search for the dog in an effort to find it standing, bring it to the front if he finds it behind, or find a vantage point to locate the dog and call it out to judges and handler. He has a lot of ground to cover and often does not know which way the dog went, so he tries to search it all. He tries to guess which direction the dog took and uses the terrain and vantage points to locate him. At times this seems an impossible task and often requires a more free-wheeling effort than that of a shooting dog. The scout must never herd the dog around the course or even appear like he is herding the dog. This makes the dog appear to lack independent intelligence. The most important rule for the scout is: NEVER GET IN FRONT OF THE JUDGES.

ABSENCES DURING THE HEAT

The AFTCA Guide says: “the customary rule for a single period of absence from judgment is 1/3 of the heat, or twenty minutes in an hour heat. The judge has discretion in application of this rule, as well as the timing of the absence. Consideration should be given to a dog found standing on point (32).” This is a guideline, and if this is their top dog, the judges might stretch out that 20 minutes. An All-Age dog is given more freedom to range, and should not be unduly penalized for periods of absence. When seen after an absence he should be to the front or standing on game. In most cases a dog which is constantly in sight is likely not manifesting an All-Age run. On the other hand, multiple extended absences may detract.

ADJUSTING RANGE TO COVER

The intelligent All-Age dog adjusts his range from his handler to the terrain and cover of the course. It is impossible to assign a numerical value to the appropriate range of an All-Age dog. Yet, whether on the prairies or in the piney woods, he is often “on-the-edge” of “running-off but not quite.”

CONSISTENTLY FRONT RUNNING

An All-Age dog consistently reaches to the front of the course holding a 10:00 to 2:00 pattern where practical. A far-ranging dog which consistently holds a lateral pattern such as 9:00 to 10:00 should be penalized in most cases. Likewise, persistent, deliberate back casting should be severely faulted. Some courses loop back on themselves, or have numerous 90 degree turns where the natural flow of the terrain is straight on, so a dog ranging far to the front may easily miss the turn and be forced by terrain and cover to come in from behind. In this and similar circumstances a dog should not be penalized.

“GRABBING THE FRONT”

It has been wisely said: “the trial is to the front.” It is common practice for the handler to take his dog quickly to the front after a find to join the other handler and judge. This is acceptable practice and not to be considered wild riding. It is good practice to ask a slow riding judge if it is OK to ride fast to the front.

STYLE/CLASS ON POINT

The All-Age dog demonstrates class and style on point: remaining intense, statuesque with no let-up in intensity as the bird is flushed.

ROTATION TO MARK

The AFTCA Guide says (40): "A good dog should be intense in pointing and minimal movement in marking flight of the birds is an extension of that intensity. Movement of the head or wheeling in the direction of flight is permissible, but there should be no significant forward motion of the rear feet in the direction of the bird's flight. What constitutes significant motion must be left to the discretion of the judge. A judge would most certainly not want to throw out the best dog in the stake just because he moved one inch more than what is specified." This guideline applies to all breeds including the GSP, which is trained to retrieve.

RELOCATION

An All-Age dog may be seen at a distance on point, during the approach multiple self-relocations to pin a running bird are not to be penalized. Once the handler dismounts and gets in front of his dog, it must not release itself for relocation. When released for relocation the dog should proceed with intense determination and ultimately locate and point the bird with class. In most cases an energetic search is preferred over one that is overly cautious, slow, and methodical. *The AFTCA Guide* says (39,40): "voluntary relocation exhibits poor manners. Sometimes a handler will conduct a prolonged (too extensive) flushing attempt, and the dog will become impatient at the long wait and start to move. There is some excuse for this when the dog apparently loses scent contact with game that may be running. The fault lies as much or more with the handler than with the dog. A good dog seeks to stay "on terms" with his game and should be allowed to move up promptly."

BIRDS FLUSH DURING A RELOCATION

It should never be assumed that if birds take flight during a relocation while the dog is moving, that the dog automatically bumped/knocked the birds. *The AFTCA Guide* says (38): "Each situation requires careful and critical analysis of the circumstances involved such as wind direction, scenting conditions, etc., with the benefit of the doubt going to the dog." This is particularly important in All-Age stakes where dogs frequently work country not planted with birds, and in wild bird trials. In both cases, it is not unusual for the top All-Age dogs to have one or two finds, increasing the importance of getting the call right.

UNPRODUCTIVES

The AFTCA Guide says (42,43): "One unproductive is a very minor offense. Two unproductives in an hour stake are generally accepted as too many making it difficult to win a quality stake. This however; must be evaluated in the context of the other performances. Sometimes poor scenting conditions and other factors can give rise to many of the dogs having unproductives during the stake."

In light of this reasoned, time-honored standard, today's common practice of automatically disqualifying a dog for two unproductives without considering exigent conditions should be questioned. This is especially true in an All-Age stake where the dog may have been standing on point for a considerable time while out of judgment, during which the birds may have run or flown off, and notably when the species on course are wild birds. There are also mixed bird trials where pen-raised chukar and quail are released, but the course habitat also supports wild populations of the same species. There is generally no problem with the 2 UP rule on pen-raised quail. In some cases where conditions of weather, scenting conditions, and species of birds may indicate, the prudent approach in some stakes may be to hold off

on sorting out the impact of UPs until the end of the stake or until the judge has some dogs with great races and no UPs.

In summary there is no hard and fast rule that two unproductives automatically disqualify a dog in all circumstances. Evaluation of the surrounding conditions and circumstances are important in applying this standard and in the all-important search for the best All-Age dog of the stake.

PACKING A BIRD

The AFTCA Guide says (41,42): "If a crippled bird runs across a dog's path while he is in motion and he picks it up, the degree of demerit would depend upon the surrounding circumstances. Generally speaking, it is not regarded as justifying a severe penalty. As one experienced judge puts it: 'If the dog is tops in the rest of his work he can stay on top with this fault. If there are two dogs in the stake otherwise equal, the one that did not have this bad break in luck should get the placement.'"

A dog seen packing a bird without the circumstances of capture having been observed should be given the benefit of the doubt regardless of whether the bird is cold, warm and dead, or warm and alive. It may be a demerit, but is generally not an offense worthy of disqualification.

BACKING

The All-Age dog must back a dog on rigid point, however the backing situation must be analyzed through the eyes of the moving dog. Things look different two feet from the ground than they do off horseback. As the dog approaches the scene, one must consider the dog's weaker eyesight, possible interference of terrain and dense cover, and backgrounds that may camouflage the pointing dog. This analysis is even more difficult at a distant All-Age range. The approaching dog should always get the benefit of the doubt.

STAMINA

Stamina is of paramount importance no matter the length of the heats. Prime consideration must be given to the dog which finishes the heat with no reduction in speed or range. Consider the dog's ability to find and handle game in all parts of the heat, and especially in the latter stages when "nose" may be diminished by fatigue and overheating. It is often said that the last ten minutes are the most important of the heat.

OVERALL PERFORMANCE

The AFTCA Guide says (49): "While it is desirable that the winner of a championship stake be charged with no errors, it is a better practice to award a title to a dog which displays all of the characteristics of style, pace intensity, drive, bird sense, etc., even though such dog be charged with some minor error or breach of manners, than to award a title to a dog lacking many of these characteristics even though he was errorless....it is especially important that champions, as probable progenitors, be named for brilliance of overall performance rather than on the basis of errorless mediocrity."

MOST IMPORTANTLY IN NAMING AN ALL-AGE CHAMPION

This standard presents a perfect dog which may be hard to find on any given day. Variables of weather, terrain, and course may pose significant challenges. The total performance of the dog should always be examined with range foremost in mind. All-Age range defines the very essence of an All-Age dog and without it, the dog fails the test of Championship performance. *The AFTCA Guide* says: "Range must take precedence over and not be compromised for a shorter, methodical, unexciting performance, no matter how immaculate (24) or plentiful the bird work."

CHAMPIONSHIP VS. A CLASSIC

On occasion the judges may determine that no dog in the stake has demonstrated a true All-Age range. In this case an accepted practice is to downgrade the stake from a Championship to a Classic, and to name 1st, 2nd and 3rd place dogs. If performances are so poor that a 1st place dog cannot be named then all placements should be withheld. It is never acceptable to name a Runner-Up without naming a Champion, nor to name a 2nd or 3rd place dog without a 1st place dog (51). Naming a Champion and withholding the Runner-Up is acceptable.

- 1) The NGSPA would like to thank the AFTCA for permission to quote from their long-standing classic publication: *GUIDELINES TO FIELD TRIAL PROCEDURE AND JUDICIAL PRACTICE*. This work is comprehensive and time-honored. It may be purchased from the AFTCA or viewed on their website www.aftca.org. We recommend its periodic thorough reading and constant reference.
- 2) For convenience the gender of people and dogs herein is expressed in the masculine form. The NGSPA recognizes the outstanding contribution of our female judges, handlers, and scouts, and of course our phenomenal female dogs.