

Enjoying your Vizsla in the Field

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For those of you new to the breed or simply new to the Club, you will have noticed that the CVVC sponsors two field trials, one hunt test, as well as its Hunting Dog stakes. What are the differences between these three activities?

A hunt test is exactly that: a test against a written standard which any and every dog is capable of qualifying against. There are currently three principal levels within the AKC Hunt Test Program: Junior, Senior, and Master Hunter -- as well as three 'advanced' levels, i.e. Junior Hunter Advanced (JHA), Senior Hunter Advanced (SHA) and Master Hunter Advanced (MHA). (The advanced levels simply require a dog to display the right qualities and appropriate training to a higher degree at that test level.) Any AKC-registered dog over six months can enter a hunt test and can begin its hunt test career at any level -- and while there is a minor benefit from completing the previous level, there is no requirement to do so. For example, a dog might complete its Junior Hunter title, but skip Senior Hunter and attempt to qualify at the Master Hunter level. As a dog proceeds through the test levels, the number of qualifying passes increases: for Junior Hunter, a dog must qualify four times, at Senior five, and at Master six; if a dog has completed the previous title level, it is given credit for one pass at the higher level, i.e. a dog who has earned a JH title need only qualify four more times at the Senior level, but if it skips and goes to Master, it will need six qualifying passes. There are no age limits for any of the levels, other than the minimum age requirement noted above.

At every level, dogs will be run in randomly-drawn pairs and evaluated by a pair of AKC-approved judges. At every level, they will be evaluated on how well they hunt, how successfully they find birds, how intense and accurate they are on point, and how well they respond to their handler's commands. By the time a dog finishes the Master Hunter level, the dog should behave like a polished gun dog, handling promptly, standing its birds all the way through the shot and fall of the bird, and then retrieving the bird to hand; it will also stop to honor its brace mate's point. And it will do all of these things with little or no command. The full test standards can be found on the AKC's website <akc.org> by clicking on the 'Events' tab, then 'Rules and Regulations' and finally 'Pointing Breed Hunting Test Regulations' in the Performance section.

By contrast, a field trial is by its very nature competitive: dogs win by doing what they do better than the rest of the competition. The goal of field trialing is to identify the best individuals within a given breed for breeding purposes -- which is also why the emphasis is, in a lot of cases, about picking the best athletes and not simply the dogs with either the most finds or the best manners. As with hunt tests, a dog has to be at least six months old to enter; but unlike hunt tests, there are a couple of additional age requirements that are also linked to performance expectations. A dog is considered a Puppy if it is between six and fifteen months old, a Derby between six and twenty-four months, and once a dog has reached two years of age, it has to run in gun dog stakes. Unlike hunt tests, too, field trials have both Amateur and Open categories for

their handlers -- and so a dog entered in Open stakes will likely have to compete against another dog handled by a professional trainer and/or handler. The other major distinction between a field trial and a hunt test is that, in many cases, the dogs will be handled from horseback in a field trial. While a handler is not required to ride in a horseback stake, they are often at a disadvantage because they cannot see their dog (and vice versa) as a horseback handler; the AKC nevertheless now has a provision that handlers who intend to walk in a stake may identify this on their entry and the Club is permitted to brace them with another walking handler if possible. The Club's spring trial in April is primarily a horseback trial although the Amateur Walking Derby and Amateur Walking Puppy stakes are, as their names suggest, for walking handlers only; every stake at our September trial is for walking handlers only.

Dogs earn points from their wins and placements and once they have reached 10 points in a given category, they will earn either a Field Champion (FC) or an Amateur Field Champion (AFC) title. As with a hunt test, dogs are randomly drawn in pairs and watched by a pair of AKC-approved judges -- and at each age level there are minimum performance expectations. In Puppy, the dog is evaluated on its focus and desire to run and hunt for birds, on its potential as an adult gun dog; in Derby, the dog also to find and point at least one bird in order to place; in the gun dog stakes, the dog has to point birds and stay steady all the way through the shot, and if, but only if, the situation presents itself, it is expected to honor its bracemate's point. Because most of the continental breeds (including the vizsla) are required to demonstrate a retrieve in order to earn points towards their FC/AFC titles, a certain number of the gun dog stakes at a trial will be designated as retrieving stakes -- in which case, the top dogs in those stakes will be called back for a bird to be shot and which they are required to bring back to their handler. While there are certain skills that the dogs have to demonstrate, there are no written objective standards for what should win on a given day in a given stake -- and ultimately placements are determined by the two judges' preferences (ideally in consensus).

The CVVC's Hunting Dog and Hunting Dog Excellent stakes can be a great introduction to the sport of field trialing for newcomers and is designed for the great hunting companion, the birdy vizsla, the eager junior hunter, the active adult hunter, or the retired gun dog that can still strut its stuff. The two stakes are only open to amateur field handlers, i.e. a professional show handler can handle a dog in these stakes but not a paid professional field trainer or handler. And like both hunt tests and field trials, dogs will be run in braces for a specified period of time. The criteria for both stakes are: the dog must be a companion to a foot hunter, must work in a forward pattern, independent of its handler but of common mind. It must handle kindly and must seek objectives likely to hold game. It must work within reasonable range to be effective to find and shoot game and it must find game. The judges are instructed to recognize the productivity of a dog, not only in quantity but in quality of finds -- that is, are the dogs willing to go look for birds in likely cover or are they content to hunt beside the course. Whereas in the regular Hunting Dog stake, the dog is expected to stay steady to the flush (and judgement will cease at that point), in the Hunting Dog Excellent stake, the dog is expected to show a more finished performance, including a retrieve. The dog is expected to remain steady to the shot, it is expected to honor if the situation presents itself (and may be collared once it has established an

honor), and it is expected to retrieve any bird shot for it. There is a trophy plaque for each of the two stakes -- which will go home with each of the winners for the year before the next running.

Upcoming CVVC Field Events:

Spring Horseback Field Trial, Flaherty Field Trial Area, Tromley Rd, East Windsor, CT, April 24-26 (contact Andrew Campbell for more information)

Hunting Dog Competitions, Flaherty Field Trial Area, Tromley Rd, East Windsor, CT, April 25 (contact Andrew for more information)

Spring Double-Header Hunt Test w/ Central New England Brittany Club, Markover Preserve, Danielson, CT, May 2-3 (contact John Morris for more information)