

NAVHDA & AKC Testing

Dos & Don'ts

Preparation:

Basic obedience:

If your dog is not responsive to commands in a home situation they are unlikely to listen when revved up and running with other dogs and birds all around.

Whistle training will give your dog a much better opportunity to succeed – a whistle is more easily heard by your dog at a distance than your voice.

Understanding the task at hand:

As a handler you should be familiar with the rules and format of the test you are entering. Both AKC and NAVHDA rulebooks are available online in PDF format if you don't want to purchase a hard copy.

Exposure of dog to task:

Your dog should have had opportunity to work off lead with birds. Dogs who have not been off a check cord in training may either cut loose and disappear, or assume that they need to stay 25' from you at all times and not actually hunt.

Your dog should have been exposed to shot. For AKC make sure you have a good blank pistol (the cheap ones at the local sporting goods store are notoriously unreliable and prone to breakage) and know how to use it. Fire down behind yourself and away from your dog (except for the Water Test, as noted later). For NAVHDA a shotgun blank will be fired. A dog that has had no exposure may be distracted (at best) or scared to the point that they stop hunting.

Your dog should be fit enough to run for 20 minutes. Especially in AKC the Junior Hunter test is frequently run in the afternoon when it is hot out in the field.

For AKC your dog should be comfortable working in the field with another dog – not playing or chasing. In both AKC and NAVHDA there can be lots of people (judges and gallery) following behind you, if your dog is prepared this won't distract them from hunting.

Teach your dog to drink from a water bottle on command. If you wait until your dog decides to come to you for a drink it may be too late as the dog could well be overheated and/or unable to scent properly due to dry mucous membranes.

Test Day:

Before you arrive:

Make sure you have all of your equipment packed and ready – vest, water bottle, leash, pistol, blanks, towel. As much as possible treat your dog as you would any other day.

After you arrive:

Check in with the test secretary and/or field marshal. Make sure you know where the course/field/water locations are and when you might be running. Ask if you can walk out with an earlier brace or dog to see where you'll be going if possible.

At the start:

Listen to the judges' instructions. If you have questions, ask.

Make sure you have a leash that is easy to remove (such as a slip lead) so you aren't struggling with a clip (especially a locking one) while your dog is jumping around anxious to go. Looping a regular leash under your dog's collar and letting go of one end is not a good substitute as the clip or handle frequently will get caught when you let one end go and jerk the dog back. You want a smooth release for both the breakaway at an AKC test and also for the tracking portion of the NAVHDA test. For AKC you should also make sure that your fellow handler is ready to release their dog so both leave the line together.

In the field or at the water:

Listen to the judges' instructions (are you sensing a trend here?). If they are directing you to go to or get out of a specific area it's usually going to be to your benefit to do so.

Don't over handle your dog. Excessive, contradictory or intimidating commands can cause it to stop hunting if it doesn't understand what you want, or stop listening to you entirely. Unless you have trained your dog that the command for "X" is really "XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX" repeating a command multiple times doesn't increase the chances that they will comply (and is likely to decrease your score for Cooperation in NAVHDA and Trainability in AKC).

Don't confuse your dog. Telling the dog to "come on" when you want it to *go* out and hunt or swim will probably not have the desired result.

Excessive talking or praising your dog can also cause problems. Giving lavish praise when a dog has one foot in the water for the NAVHDA NA Test or the AKC Water Test, for example, can cause them to think they've completed the task at hand and stop. Giving praise every time your dog comes near you may cause them to think they're supposed to stay with you rather than search the field.

Don't ask your dog to do more than the test requires. If you always heel your dog up to the line and they will do it reliably, don't change your routine. If you've never done it in the past, or your dog isn't reliable with the heel command don't try to impress the judges or your fellow handlers with your dog's obedience skills when it's not necessary. You don't want to be the person yelling "HEEL, Spot, HEEL! HEEL!! HEEL!!!" as your dog drags you along and you arrive at the starting point stressed out and frustrated with your dog.

Help your dog accomplish the task by getting their focus in the right place. For the NA tracking test, for example, make sure your dog acknowledges the feather pile and is heading in the right direction as indicated by the judges before you release them. For the NA water make sure your dog is focused on

the bumper before you throw it into the water (the bumper, not the dog). Stand close to the edge and be ready to intercept the dog when they come out. If you have them under control you can immediately re-direct them to go back into the water or prepare for the judges' examination. For the AKC Water Test fire your blank pistol in the direction that the bird is falling to direct your dog's attention there.

Post-Test:

Dog management:

Make sure your dog is cool (or warm, depending on weather conditions), dried off (if wet) and free from burrs. You want them to have a great day so they're anxious to come out and do it again.

Administrative tasks:

When you get your results ask questions if you don't understand the scores. Judges are amenable to discussing (note: discussing, not debating) your dog's performance and how the scoring system works. Remember that they can only judge what they see in the short time that your dog is in the field or water. If you don't qualify or prize, ask for help understanding why so you will know what to work on in your training going forwards.

Finally:

Even if they day didn't go as well as you hoped give your dog some love. They don't know what a test means, or why you might be disappointed. They still think you're the greatest – the least you can do is return the favor.