

WHAT TO EXPECT FROM YOUR FIRST HRC HUNT TEST

By

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So, you are days away from going to your first Hunt Test. You have been training ever moment to be ready for this weekend. You have taught your dog to walk on a leash without tearing your shoulder up, how to mark, worked through picking up birds, and even bringing them all the way back.

Now it is time to get YOU ready. A little planning on your part can make the weekend more enjoyable for you and your furry best friend.

The Process

MORNING OF THE TEST

You got up way early and drove, or spent the night in a nearby hotel, or maybe you even camped (my favorite by far!). You find your way to the Hunt Grounds and the Hunt Headquarters. All handlers are required to check in with the Hunt Secretary each day. This lets the club know you are there and ready to run. You also receive your program with your dog number. This a wonderful opportunity to meet people from different clubs, or maybe even people from your own club. Now is also a good time to air your dog. Take a short walk and let them go potty. You do not perform your best when you must go, neither does your pup. Please keep your dog on lead. There may be several dogs out at one time. If you have a female dog, you will have to go through a "bitch check". Every female dog must be checked to ensure they are not in heat. If your dog is in heat they are not allowed to run.

After everyone is checked in and walk-ups are registered, usually around 7:00 a.m. and 7:30 a.m., the Hunt Chairperson or other club member will give a welcome speech and give specific information that you need for the day. This will include rules for using the grounds, like where to park, where the tests are located, restrooms...you know, the important stuff. Gun safety will also be discussed. Now it is test time. The Hunt Chairman will send handlers out to the individual test sites one group at a time. A lead vehicle will be designated for everyone to follow.

AT THE TEST SITE

You follow the lead vehicle to the test side and are lead to the parking area. Often this is just pulling off a trail into the brush. Be considerate of others when you park. Some will be leaving to go to other tests, and some will show up late because they were at other tests.

When the judges are ready, they will have a short handlers' meeting where they will discuss the specifics of the test, including gun safety. A test dog will run the test to demonstrate the mechanics. Judges will answer any questions and explain people can sit and watch test. Sometimes the gallery has a great view of the entire test, sometimes it does not. Either way, you can watch other dogs run and cheer on good runs. By the way, this is a great time to put on your duck call/whistle, so you do not forget it.

The judges will call for the first dog and the test begins. A test Marshall has the job of keeping the day moving smoothly. This is the go-to person if you have questions. They will have the running order and adjust to allow for people running multiple dogs. You may be dog #13 but be the 3rd dog to run because everyone else is running other tests. Likewise, you could be dog #1 and run 5th because they are trying to get everybody done and on to other test levels.

The important thing to remember is to be flexible but take the time to get you and your dog ready to run. If you are not ready, tell the marshal. Air your dog!!!! Judges do not want to clean up after your dog when they take a dump in the middle of the test. It is important to keep your dog on a leash. If your dog interferes in another dog's test, at the same or

different level, your dog is disqualified. This means even if you are done with your test and would have passed, you can be disqualified. This is the last thing anyone wants to have happen. Be aware.

Your spot is coming up, and you and your dog are ready. You go wait in the holding blind and wait for the working dog to finish. While waiting in the holding blind it is important to not let your dog see the test. Not the marks and not the bird boys or anyone walking in the test area. It will just cause problems for your dog. In the perfect world your dog will sit quietly behind the blind like a good puppy. Some dogs hear the gun shots for the working dog, and they want to GO! It may be around the blind, over the blind, or even under the blind. Be prepared. Your dog knows that it is almost their time to run, and they are tired of waiting. You will be told when to go to the next holding blind or called to the line to run.

As you walk to the line, the judges will ask your dog number and the dog's call name. Remember it the number you were given in the morning and that is in the program. It is not the running slot that you the Marshall told you to run in. They will instruct you again what to do and ask if there are any questions. Take your time, understand the test, and take a deep breath...it is time for the fun. Make sure you are in camo, shirt and hat at minimum. Still have your duck call and whistle?

THE AFTERMATH

Your dog did great! Or not so much...or not at all. Either way, you are allowed to come back and run the afternoon series. Even if you did not pick up a bird, you can try again in the afternoon. Go put your dog away, pull up a chair and watch the rest of the dogs run.

BREAKTIME

Once all the dogs have run in the morning, the judges, bird technicians and hunt committee will pick up the test equipment and move to the location for the afternoon. These moves can be a short distance that you do not even have to move your car, or you may have a longer way to drive. It is always appreciated when people jump in to help move a test, even if it is not your club. The more people that help the faster you can run again.

But it is time for lunch. The judges will break for lunch. This is also a great time to head to the nearest restroom for yourself.

AFTERNOON SESSION

The judges will have another quick little handlers' meeting, run a test dog, and answer any questions. Your dog number stays the same, but your running order number may change again. When all dogs are done running, the test will be cleaned up and the judges will go discuss the dogs. Once again, anything you can do to help clean up is appreciated, regardless if it is your club's test or not.

THE SOCIAL

After all the tests are complete and cleaned up, the host club sponsors a Social. This is a dinner, awards ceremony and fundraiser. Dinner can be anything from homemade chili to a catered BBQ dinner. The fundraiser can vary widely as well from small and simple to large and involved. It is best to bring cash or a checkbook...some clubs may take credit cards, but not all.

The most important part of the night is to have judges award ribbons to dogs that passed that day. This takes a while but gives recognition to all levels of dogs and handlers. Please feel free to cheer loudly and often. After the last ribbon is handed out, it is time to clean up and head to the hotel, camper or home.

NEXT DAY, SAME THING

The second day is full of hope and dreams. No matter how good or bad you did the day before, you have a new opportunity to shine. Each day is a new day, and a new test! The entire second day goes about like Saturday. The biggest difference is that after the test, ribbons are usually handed out at the Hunt Headquarters. The Judges or Marshall will let you know exactly when and when to meet. There is nothing better than a couple ribbons sitting on the dashboard on the way home.

WHY DO SOME PEOPLE GET WET, LIKE REALLY WET?

HRC has a tradition when you title a dog. You get wet. For a Started Title you get a bottle of water dumped on you. Hunting Retriever (Seasoned) it is a 5-Gallon bucket of water. When your dog obtains their Hunting Retriever Championship (Finished) you and your dog go swimming...and you have to float your hat.

It is a Badge of honor and pride. Enjoy an experience that binds us all together.

WHAT TO BRING

Now that you know some about what happens at the test, let's talk about what to bring.

BASICS TO BRING FOR THE PUP

It is usually easy to remember the test related things: collar, lead or leash, whistle, training dummy, kennel, bed. It is amazing how many people forget the important things: food, water, something for shade. Get everything together ahead of time, check your list a couple times. A small fan is a must have as it gets hotter.

You cannot use "training devices" during the test or on the test grounds. This includes pinch collars, clickers, e-collars, heeling sticks. If you are running Started, you can have a flat collar and a regular leash. Once you get past Started your dog must run without a collar and must use a slip lead.

I also carry a dog emergency kit. It has eye wash, needle nose pliers, gauze pads, tape, ace bandage, Benadryl, and rubbing alcohol. Flea & Tick treatment is also important to use.

THINGS FOR YOU

The items you need for yourself varies on space. Sunglasses, rain gear, cold weather clothes, bug spray, tick repellent, camo clothing, rubber knee boot or hip waders, sunscreen, water, and snacks are all must haves, regardless of space.

Chairs, sunshades, and coolers are nice to have depending on space. I also carry a rule book and Judge and Handler Seminar book. It is also nice to have camera, video camera.

WHAT NOT TO BRING

Once again, you can not use training devices on a test site. E-collars and/or remotes, pinch collars, choke chains, and heeling sticks or anything that could be considered a training aide is not allowed while running the test or at the hunt location. If you and your dog need some "quality alone time", please drive off site a couple miles and train.

You also can not run your dog with a vest on. This could be considered a training aide. This could be considered a training aide.

THE RIDE HOME

I think it is important to have traditions. When I am fortunate get a ribbon at a test, we celebrate. We place the ribbons on our dashboards and take a picture. It is a nice easy way to show your family and buddies how the weekend went. I use #dashboarddecorations on social media to tag our photos.

We always stop and get my pups a cheese burger. They all eat it bite by bite with me holding it. Yes, I still have all my fingers, but the puppy is still learning. We also do this when get back from a good day of hunting. It started as a way to give my Dad's older dog some aspirin, but got continued with our younger dogs. You may do something else....mine would be o.k. with Pup Cup from Dairy Queen, so would my kids.

The important thing is to find a way to enjoy the ride home, whether it is 30 minutes or several hours. You have worked hard and you deserve it.