

## The SAVHDA Novice Hunting Test 2016 – Western Cape

by Bob Winter

This Test is described by SAVHDA as suitable for young dogs in training that are beyond the Natural Ability Test, but not yet ready for the Advanced Versatile Hunting Test. It is also described as a test that Hunters can bring their dogs to without much in the way of formal training, the idea being that any reasonably experienced hunting dog can be tested on the basis of field experience and sound, versatile natural capabilities. What they did not tell us was that it might be difficult to do really well...

Four hopefuls were entered in the SAVHDA Novice Hunting Test on the 18<sup>th</sup> September 2016:

- ✚ Ella is an experienced hunting dog with Field Trial wins and awards - British Breeds Maiden Stake Win; British Breeds Maiden Stake COM; British Breeds Championship qualified dog,
- ✚ Blaze is an experienced hunting dog with multiple Field Trial wins and awards - HPR Maiden Stake Win; HPR Open Stake COM; British Breeds Maiden Stake 3<sup>rd</sup> Place; British Breeds Championship qualified dog,
- ✚ Trigger is a young but experienced hunting dog with one Field Trial award – British Breeds Derby Stake COM, and
- ✚ My dog Strike is just an experienced hunting dog with about nine minutes of formal training but a fair amount of on the job experience.



Based on previous experience with the old, traditional Natural Ability Test, I expected the test to be a bit of a walk in the park..... Well, I really had to think again! No homing pigeons in traps for this test! The field work, being Use of Nose, Search and Pointing was judged to a high standard exclusively on wild game, in this case Cape Francolin and Guineafowl. To pass this leg of the Test, dogs were required to find, point, hold and present wild birds to the handler and judging party. That took some

time, as hunting wild birds often does, but was well executed by all dogs. No problem so far!

Then came the drag – in this instance a guineafowl dragged for some 100m or more. Easy right? Well



there were some surprises. The older dogs managed the drag part of the exercise with relative ease. The youngest dog had to be restarted twice, but managed. The main difficulty for most began with the return - dogs were required to retrieve from about 100m and deliver efficiently without the begging and pleading so often tolerated while hunting and even at Field Trials! Only quiet encouragement was tolerated without fault.

Then came the semi-blind over water, in this case a river. Well, the dogs were excited by the shot, but the gun was not in sight and the dogs were also unable to see the fall of the Goose. From the

point at which the dogs were to be cast off, the goose was just visible fairly close to the far bank. Again, quite a challenge - no begging and pleading with the dog to enter the water, no big splash to fire the dog up, and not much of the goose visible. Being close to the far bank, the dogs were all pretty much inclined to swim to the far bank and try to run the bank back to the handler. Well, bad luck with that! Being a river, that was never going to work. The dogs had to persevere and swim back across the river and deliver without coercion for top marks.



Then a marked retrieve from deep cover close to the far river bank really tested the dogs. They had to push into thick cover to find and retrieve the goose, and then for best results, swim straight back to the handler. Young Trigger struggled to push into the cover barrier and consequently struggled to find the goose but managed in the end. All the dogs again pushed to the far bank and tried to run the bank back to the handler. With the same lack of success.

Ella eventually failed to retrieve the goose to hand after not being able to find an obvious way back to the handler. Blaze came close to failing for the same reason. Strike tried to run the bank for very considerable distances before finally taking the water route back to me. This exercise effectively tested very basic requirements but proved to be a challenging test that cost us all dearly.

Manner of retrieving, Desire to Work, Cooperation and Obedience were judged throughout the test. To pass at all, dogs were required to pass every single element of the test at a prescribed level. To win Prizes dogs were required to pass every element at appropriately high standards.

Test results are summarised as follows –

	<b>Blaze</b>	<b>Strike</b>	<b>Ella</b>	<b>Trigger</b>
Use of Nose	4	4	4	4
Search	3	4	4	4
Pointing	2	4	4	4
Drag	4	4	4	2
Water Semi-Blind	4	4	4	4
Water Deep Cover	4	4	4	2
Manner of Retrieving	4	2	0	3
Desire to Work	4	4	4	4
Cooperation	4	4	4	4
Obedience	3	3	3	4
Points	138	142	138	132
Prize	Prize III	Prize III	No Prize	Prize III
Temperament	Normal	Normal	Normal	Normal
Gun Sensitivity	Stable	Stable	Stable	Stable

**Conclusion.** The experienced hunting dogs did manage to pass the test, but not with top scores. Lessons learned and impressions? There were a few –

- ✚ The test was a practical hunting test throughout and there were no trivial gimmicky requirements.
- ✚ Our dogs clearly needed more practical training/practice to attain top scores and a Prize 1 in this test.
- ✚ This test was no breeze – it was a meaningful test of practical performance. Three of the dogs passed, but to score top marks in this test, our dogs would have had to perform at a better practical level in every element of the test.
- ✚ My dog Strike certainly needed more than my regulation 9 minutes of training that he had had!
- ✚ Handlers went away with a clear measure of their practical strengths and weaknesses and interestingly, are quite determined to lift their game for a rematch in 2017's Novice Hunting Test.
- ✚ I think this test is a very good way of testing for solid versatile genetics. (The Advanced Versatile Hunting Test is even better.)
- ✚ I think this type of test complements traditional Field Trials fantastically well because it tests some very important versatile attributes that are not conventionally tested by Field Trials.