

The NAVHDA Natural Ability Test

By Lori Vickerman

(All information included is summarized from the NAVHDA Aims, Programs and Test Rules Book)

The NAVHDA tests are aimed at evaluating the potential ability specifically of a versatile hunting dog. The tests are meant to recreate actual hunting situations and conditions for a dog that can hunt the field for upland game, retrieve water fowl, and track an injured bird.

There are multiple skills tested by NAVHDA and each is given a score from 0 (fail) to 4 (excellent) which is then multiplied by an index number which indicates the relative importance of that skill. To keep the scoring as fair as possible 3 judges observe the dog and agree on the score given and at least one of the judges must be from outside the NAVHDA chapter hosting the test. Unlike CKC or AKC Field Tests at the end of the day all scores are announced by the senior judge to the group, and scores are published in NAVHDA's magazine and website. Further the judges remain after the scores are read to discuss the evaluations with the owners of the tested dogs.



Lori and Loki training at Wessex. Alberta

Areas of Evaluation in all NAVHDA tests:

1. Use of nose

Considered to be the most important aspect of a versatile dog's ability to produce game and is therefore assigned the highest index number of 6. A dog that can find game in various conditions and situations has a good nose, and a dog that stops to check scent spots but does not point indicates the dog is able to distinguish between smells. Conversely, repeated non-productive points (when a dog points where there is no game) are a sign of a dog with only a fair nose. A dog that "bumps" birds (flushes a bird without indicating that it was there) while hunting into the wind may indicate a poor nose.

2. Search

A Natural Ability (NA) level dog should show purpose, enthusiasm, independence and being willing to investigate areas that would act as cover for birds. The dog should show good stamina and should leave those watching no doubt that all ground has been covered. An NA dog should use his nose to hunt and his eyes to communicate with the handler and should hunt at a distance from the handler that is appropriate to the ground cover.

3. Water

The ability to swim and the desire to retrieve game from water is very important in a versatile hunting dog and this skill is given an index number of 5 in the natural ability test.

4. Pointing

The point should be intense unmistakable and above all productive although it is not required to be held long for a NA dog. An NA dog should be rewarded for repositioning their point on a moving bird, but blinking (deliberately avoiding birds, or pointing and then moving away for no reason) should be severely penalized. An NA dog may break and chase the bird after establishing an obvious point.

5. Tracking

The ability to track an injured bird is invaluable in a hunting dog and allows the hunter to obtain birds that have been injured but not killed.

6. Desire to Work

The NA dog must show a desire to work and willingness to find birds throughout the field and tracking portions of the test. Aimless running should not be mistaken for desire to work, the dog must show purpose in its desire.

5. Cooperation

Cooperation is the dogs willingness to work for his or her handler. Even while on point a cooperative versatile dog may move his eyes or turn his head to look at the handler, or return on his own from chasing a flushed bird.

7. Physical Attributes

A good hunting dog should have a sound body, and good coat. It should meet the standards of its breed and NAVHDA believes a dog that has correct conformation will live a longer life and hunt longer too. Physical attributes are not counted in the dogs score.

The Natural Ability Test

The NAVHDA natural Ability Test is to evaluate dogs under 16 months of age for their potential as adult versatile hunting dogs. Dogs over 16 months of age may run the NA test for evaluation purposes but will not receive a NA Prize.

Although the NA test is meant to test the inherent natural ability of a young dog some training, bird contact and exposure to gun fire is absolutely required. Also some work on tracking before the test should not be overlooked. The four phases of the test may be done in any order but it is desirable to do the tracking phase after the field phase when the dog is calm and to evaluate the physical attributes after the water section of the test.

4 Phases of the NA test:

Field Phase –

Dogs are scored on:

Use of Nose, Search, Pointing, Desire, Cooperation, Gun Shyness

The NA dog is sent to hunt in a field with planted birds for a minimum of 20 minutes. At two points during the field phase the judge will signal the gunner to fire one round of blank ammunition from a shotgun so the dog may be scored for reaction to the shot.

Tracking Phase -

Dogs are scored on:

Use of nose, tracking, desire to work, cooperation

A flightless pheasant or chukar is released in an area that has been reserved for tracking. The handler is allowed to show the dog where the tracks starts and then must release the dog and stand quietly facing forward and allow the dog to track the bird.

Water Phase –

Dogs are scored on:

Water entry, desire to work, cooperation

The water test should be at a place where the entry is gradual. The handler may choose from a selection of dummies to be thrown into the water in an area deep enough for the dog to swim. The dog must show that it can enter the water and swim twice. Swimming speed and style are not important and the dog does not need to retrieve the dummy. Dogs that refuse to swim will be called back at the end of the water phase and a dead bird may be thrown in to entice the dog to swim. If dead game is used then the maximum score a dog can receive is 2.

Physical Examination –

They physical exam will be done directly after the swimming phase of the test while the dogs coat is wet. Physical attributes will be noted but do not count towards the dogs score.



Loki on point and retrieving the bird to hand



Scoring System for the Natural Ability Test
(Minimum score for each prize classification in brackets)

Test	Index Number	Max Attainable Points	Prize I	Prize II	Prize III
Nose	6	24	24(4)	18(3)	18(3)
Search	5	20	20(4)	15(3)	10(2)
Water	5	20	15(4)	15(3)	10(2)
Pointing	4	16	12(3)	12(3)	8(2)
Tracking	2	8	6(3)	4(2)	2(1)
Desire to Work	4	16	16(4)	12 (3)	8(2)
Cooperation	2	8	6(3)	4 (2)	2(1)
Total		112	99	80	58

For more information or to find a local NAVHDA chapter go to www.NAVHDA.org
Watch for information on the Utility Preparatory Test in the next newsletter!