

# FPRC Training Guidelines

January 4, 2011

## General rules and guidelines

1. Training (teaching, confidence, success, establish and enforce standards) vs. licensed test (an evaluation, no help or assistance).
2. Camouflage or dark clothing is required when running a dog or working at a hunt test. It is also a good idea to *avoid* wearing a light-colored hat while working a gun station at a licensed test (re: your head is often visible above the gunner's blind). Conversely, light-colored clothing can be beneficial in training when you want to be more visible (see *Helping dogs*, below). However, be aware that light-colored clothing can cause unwanted distractions in training too (e.g., a dog locks on your white hat while being setup for a blind). Bottom line is to be aware of your actions and how they can affect the working dog, both in training and at a test!
3. A training group is only as good as its members, and it takes everyone pitching in to make it work smoothly. Try to be on time to assist with setups. If you show up late, start by asking if there is anyone in the field that needs to be relieved so they can run their dog. In other words, be prepared to run your dog last! If you ran your dog in the first series but didn't help in the field, then make sure you start the second series (or next training session) by volunteering to help with the setup or by manning a gun station. Also, socializing is a natural and fun part of any dog-training group, but don't let it interfere with training. For example, if you are waiting in line to run a dog, make sure you (and your dog) are ready to go in order to avoid down time between dogs. And take some time before you get to the line to consider what you want to accomplish with a particular training setup – if in doubt, ask a more experienced member for advice. Also, just because there are 3 marks doesn't mean that you have to run all 3 – focus on what's best for your dog and where you are in your training program (e.g., don't run a cheating water mark if you haven't taught the concept yet!). Remember, training and testing are two different things; each has its place and purpose. The goal of training is to teach (concepts and standards), instill confidence, and build on success!
4. No smoking while working at a gun station or running a dog (both in training and at a test).
5. No alcohol consumption before or during training sessions and tests.
6. Show respect when others are running their dogs (be quiet). Compliments are welcomed and encouraged for good dog work (both in training and at tests). You may also wish to acknowledge the occasional free entertainment provided by handlers, helpers, and judges (e.g., canoe acrobatics, mud wrestling, duck corralling, trick shooting [how to miss a duck at 20 yd with 4 shots], water-bucket races and associated truck fires, etc.).
7. Respect private property, park in designated areas, stay on roads & trails, close all gates behind you (even if you know someone else is coming in/out in a few minutes – if they are not in sight, shut the gate), and properly dispose of all litter (including shell casings and unusable training birds).
8. Take time to air your dogs before coming to the line. Where appropriate, observe “airing out” locations so that you do not interfere with a test or training session. If in doubt, ask!

9. Bring appropriate training equipment including knee-high rubber boots, waders, a good (reliable) blank pistol, and a duck call (preferably a loud one). When assisting with tear down, help keep track of group training equipment, especially small but expensive items such as launcher electronics and blank pistols (i.e., treat this equipment as you would your own, and make sure it gets back to the owner or appropriate equipment trailer).
10. If there is a large training group, please try to minimize down time between dogs by making sure there is a dog in the holding blind or ready to run.
11. Verify whether training aids are allowed for a particular event (training session vs. fun run vs. licensed test). Where training aids are permissible, they should be used with common sense and respect.
12. Treat handler guns (including wooden cutouts) as you would a loaded firearm – practice safe gun handling.

### Gun station etiquette

1. Whether training with a group or helping at a licensed test, good gun-station work starts by paying attention to the dogs and what is happening around you! You can also learn a lot by watching dogs and handlers from a gun station, especially if you are working a station with a more experienced trainer/handler – don't be afraid to ask them questions (*quietly*).
2. Know how to *safely* load the winger/launcher and operate the gun, radio, and launcher electronics *prior to* running the first dog. **If you are unsure about anything, just ask!**
3. Popper guns are capable of causing serious injury. Treat them as you would a loaded firearm. Do not lay popper guns on the ground – use a gun stand if possible. **Think safety!**
4. **Make sure you listen to and understand the specific instructions for each dog.** It will be the same for all dogs in a given test level [stake], but may vary among combined stakes in a test. And it will certainly vary among dogs of different skill levels in a training session.
  - a) Are you a single mark or part of a double or triple? What is the order of the marks? Note: the term “*around the horn*” means that marks will be thrown in order starting with the left or right outside mark (make sure you know whose left/right they are referring to!).
  - b) When near water, are you splashing the mark in the water or landing it on shore?
  - c) Where exactly are you throwing... are you trying to hit a spot or a terrain feature? Is this throw the same as for the last dog or different in some way? Is the fall area critical or is there some leeway?
  - d) A “*square*” or “*flat*” throw means a 90-degree angle from the line to the dog.
  - e) An “*angled back*” throw means at an angle away from the dog. “*Deep*” can also mean angled back.
  - f) An “*angled in*” throw means thrown at an angle towards the dog.
  - g) A “*hard*” or “*long*” throw means a greater distance.
  - h) If you are uncertain about any instructions (e.g., order of marks), be sure to ask!!

## 5. When it's time to throw:

- a) Often, one of the judges (or training coordinator/handler) will signal you to begin your throwing sequence (*see item 5b, below*). In other cases, the handler may “start the test” by calling on a duck call. Or you may be asked to start your throw based on a delayed count (e.g., count to 3 Mississippi after the previous mark hits the ground).
  - b) The normal NAHRA sequence is to call (e.g., duck call), throw the bird or bumper, and shoot when the bird/bumper is at the top of the arc. This should be a continuous sequence with no delays (*see item 5e, below*). Be aware that occasionally you may be asked to use a different sequence. For example, a sequence of “call-shoot-throw-shoot” may be used in windy conditions or on long marks when dogs are having trouble hearing the attraction call (the first shot gets the dog's attention and the second shot helps the dog focus on the mark while it is in the air). Or someone may be training for another test venue that uses a different sequence (e.g., “shoot-throw” for field trails or a “silent throw” for HRC).
  - c) Duck calls are commonly used to get the dog's attention, but occasionally you may be instructed to shout something like “rooster-rooster-rooster” or “hey-hey-there goes one.” Regardless, make your calls as loud as possible and face the line so the dog can hear it well. And don't worry if your duck-calling skills are not realistic – being loud is more important than realism here!
  - d) In training, we want to make sure the dog is focused on the mark. Thus, you may have to call longer or *add some movement* to get the dog's attention. Make sure the dog is looking at you when you throw a mark in training! Conversely, in a licensed test the emphasis is on consistency – keep your routine/sequence/timing the same for each dog unless the judges tell you otherwise! For example, in a licensed test begin your throwing sequence as *soon as the judge signals* (regardless of where the handler and dog are located) and keep your routine the same even if the dog is not looking your way; sometimes the dog will be out of position or not paying attention – that's part of the test!
  - e) Avoid delays between calling and the throw/shot – it should be a *continuous sequence*. Delays can create problems when running multiple marks (even as singles), especially when another gun station is visible or highly attractive (live-flyer station). For example, a dog may swing its head toward the attractive station during the delay and it doesn't see your mark or only catches it out of its peripheral vision. You have just made the judge's job a lot more difficult, and in training it is a waste of time if the dog doesn't see the mark!
  - f) If you are ‘hand-throwing’ a mark, practice before throwing a mark for a working dog (in a licensed test, check with the judges before you throw a practice duck – you don't want an on-deck dog to see the mark). This is also good advice when you replace someone in a station with a hand-thrown mark. Consistency is very important, especially in a licensed test! Ask the judges if the throw is okay.
  - g) If you don't have experience hand-throwing a dead duck (or live bird), ask someone to show you the proper technique (it may vary depending on the particular mark).
  - h) Throw the bird/bumper as high as possible, but also make sure it goes a reasonable distance from the gun station (re: a straight up-and-down throw can create problems for experienced dogs that have learned to stay away from gun stations when hunting a fall).
6. *In training*, raise your hand when the dog picks up the mark so the handler can call the dog in if they wish. Conversely, *in a test* do **not** signal unless instructed to do so by the judges (re: a dog could drop or blink the bird, and by signaling you can create a judging issue if the handler calls the dog in).

7. Occasionally a dog will not complete a retrieve and the judges (or training coordinator) will ask you to “*pick up the birds.*” Make sure the birds get picked up – sometimes the judges get distracted and forget to tell you. If in doubt, ask the judges (but make sure the working dog is really done).
8. Keep birds and bumpers secured in the gun station. Do not let a dog get a bird out of the station! If a dog approaches the bird/bumper pile, give it a quiet but firm ‘no’ (do not hit, swat at, or scare the dog). In training you may have to leave the station to help a dog; be aware of situations where the station pile may be more attractive than the fall area (it is best to have the birds/bumpers secured or covered if you have to leave the station unguarded).
9. In most circumstances, do not load or reset a winger while a dog is running marks or a blind! **Ask yourself, could my actions potentially distract the working dog or interfere with its evaluation** (e.g., winger accidentally goes off – with or without a bird)? If the answer is yes, don’t do it!!
10. **Developing good gun-station habits in training can help prevent problems in a licensed test.** Try to avoid moving around or talking while a dog is running marks or a blind. Dogs can hear amazingly well and most hunt-test dogs quickly learn to focus on noises and movements in a gun station. Even a moderately loud whisper can distract a dog in certain situations. Bottom line is to be cognizant of any action that could distract or interfere with the working dog.
11. Avoid operating a gun action when the station is reasonably close to the point-of-origin or when a dog is hunting a nearby mark or running a blind. This goes for live guns and popper guns. Again, dogs can hear amazingly well and they quickly learn to key on a gun’s action (including popping a spent round). Only operate the action when you are sure it won’t influence the working dog.
12. Inform the judges (or training coordinator) when you are down to your last bird. In training, always have an extra bumper or bird in case you have to help out! It is also a good idea to have a few white or w/b bumpers at the gun station *in training*, even if you are throwing ducks for most dogs (re: there may be some young dogs that have not been exposed to birds).
13. If you plan to throw ducks for most dogs (training or at a test), be sure to test the winger with ducks. Most wingers throw ducks and bumpers very differently – using bumpers to setup the winger and then switching to ducks (with the same winger settings) will almost always result in low and short ‘duck’ throws.
14. Be aware of changes to the throw and fall area as a result of changing wind conditions, bumper variation (different size or weight), or the winger ‘walking’ because it is not staked down. You may have to make adjustments on-the-fly to maintain a consistent throw and fall. In a licensed test, always check with the judges before making major changes to the winger.
15. Help the ‘judges’ keep track of the blind pile, especially if you are the closest gun station to the blind. We want to avoid the situation where a dog is handled to an empty blind stake! Also, pay attention to dogs coming back from the blind pile. Occasionally a dog will grab more than one bird and they may drop the extra bird on the way back. If you see this happen, let the judges or training coordinator know before they run the next dog (re: the judges may not have seen the dropped bird).
16. Let the judges know ASAP if you are having equipment problems (winger, gun). Don’t wait until they have a dog on the line and start calling for marks! This holds for training too – communication is very important!

17. Be consistent, especially in a licensed test (e.g., call duration and loudness, mechanics of the throw, etc.). If replacing someone in the gun station, make sure you understand where the mark is supposed to land (especially if it is a hand-thrown mark) and if they are doing anything out-of-the-ordinary (extra shot, extra long or loud call, alternative calling sequence, etc.).
18. Be very careful to avoid dropping birds or leaving bird scent in the field when re-birding a gun station. If possible, use a bucket or bag to transport birds in the field. If you are carrying birds by their necks, be sure to hold them above the cover and out front (so you can see if you drop one). Also, try to stay off the “lines” used by the dogs – if feasible, take an indirect route to the station when re-birding or changing gunners.
19. If manning a live-flyer station, don't pull a duck out of the crate any sooner than necessary, especially when dogs are running singles (re: vocalization by a duck can pull a dog off of another mark). Try to keep the duck quiet by grabbing its bill or tucking its head under a wing. Also, be consistent in how you load a live flyer into a winger – it helps to ensure a more consistent flight path and fall. If changing ‘duck loaders’, make sure the next loader does it the same way (also show them the anchor point that you were using).
20. If you are exposed (no gunner's blind!) while throwing a bird, be very still after your bird is down, especially if the dog is running multiple marks. Any movement can easily distract the working dog. When the dog is not looking, you can usually sit down (if the scenario allows it; also see item #1, below).
21. Occasionally you will have an equipment or brain malfunction that results in a ‘no bird’ (e.g., the bird/bumper gets caught in the pouch or hits the cross bar, you load the winger but forget to stretch the rubber, you forget to load the duck or bumper!). In cases where the bird doesn't come out of the gun station (it's not visible to the dog), be prepared to quickly hand throw and shoot another bird or bumper. NOTE: this is generally a good response in training, but it may not be a good idea in a licensed test (e.g., when the hand-thrown bird would result in a different mark). The best solution in a licensed test is to avoid ‘no birds’ by being extra vigilant when operating the winger (double and triple-check your winger setup each time – check the rubbers and pulleys, make sure the winger head is lined up, make sure the duck is sitting snugly in the pouch with its head tucked under a wing, etc.).
22. If you are using a blank pistol, keep track of how many rounds are remaining and make sure the cylinder is positioned on the unspent rounds. Take advantage of down time (e.g., between dogs or marks) to reload the pistol. Make sure you have at least 2 unspent rounds in the pistol in case you need to re-throw a mark. If you are using an ‘unreliable’ pistol (e.g., where the cylinder spins freely between shots), reload the pistol frequently to avoid playing Russian roulette with the attraction shot. Note: an attraction shot is required in a licensed test. Thus, do not use an unreliable pistol or popper gun in a licensed test!

### **Helping dogs (in training)**

1. Be visible (training only) – especially for inexperienced dogs or difficult marking concepts. For example, stand up or step out from the gunner's blind before throwing the mark and remain standing after the mark is thrown. Wearing a light-colored shirt or jacket also helps, especially when throwing long marks or marks in low-light conditions or against dark backgrounds.

2. Be prepared to help each dog (training only) – e.g., have a dummy tucked into your back pocket or have one handy, and carry a duck call. The time it takes to look for these things can mean the difference between success and failure – be ready!
3. When is it time to help?
  - a) The biggest challenge is determining when to help (timing is very important) – often it depends on the dog’s experience level and the specifics of a mark. This is an acquired skill that improves as one learns to read a dog’s body language. It also helps to have some familiarity with each dog or at least their experience level. If you are new at this and unsure when to help, look to the handler and/or training coordinator for a signal – but be ready! Also, take advantage of more experienced trainers; volunteer to work a gun station with them – you can learn a lot by watching and asking questions.
  - b) The handler often tracks the dog’s location by watching your head. Sometimes *in training* you can help the handler by signaling the dog’s location and direction of movement (e.g., when the dog is out-of-sight of the handler). Do not point out a dog’s location in a licensed test.
  - c) After you throw, your job is to watch both the dog and handler (constantly looking back and forth). If the handler or training coordinator starts waving his/her arms, that’s your cue to help the dog. Be ready! Note: do not ask if a dog needs help – yelling is a huge distraction. If you are uncertain whether to help, pay attention to the handler and wait for instructions.
  - d) If there’s something unsafe or some other problem that the handler cannot see from the line, then you have to use your judgment on helping the dog.
  - e) Anticipate helping when a dog breaks down (starts hunting) well short of the mark, the dog drives to the fall area but eventually gives up on the bird (watch the dog’s body language) or indicates an *intention* to switch (leave the fall area and establish a hunt in the area of another fall), or the dog gets too close to a blind pile (usually outside the fall area). Conversely, **if the dog is showing effort and putting on an intelligent hunt, then the dog should be allowed to continue the hunt without help.**
  - f) Be prepared to step in sooner with inexperienced dogs, especially on challenging marks (long, tight, or difficult terrain). Be aware that handlers of more experienced dogs may not want help and often prefer to let the dog “work it out” or re-run the mark (e.g., failure to mark was due to head swinging). Nevertheless, be prepared to help if any handler asks for it! Some handlers will let you know in advance that a particular mark may be challenging for their dog. However, inexperienced handlers may not recognize the challenges and even experienced handlers can be surprised by a dog’s performance on a particular mark or setup. The bottom line is to be ready!
4. **How to help a dog – it’s a continuum:**
  - a) Stand up and/or step out from the gunner’s blind (often sufficient to draw a more experienced dog to the fall area). Also see item #1, above.
  - b) Slowly and silently move toward the fall area (watch the dog’s behavior – if a dog responds by working toward the fall area, then just stand still and be quiet – let the dog work). **Note:** you often can incrementally implement steps “a” and “b” without waiting for a signal from the handler, especially when you see cues that a young or inexperienced dog is having trouble with a mark – see item “3e”, above). It also puts you in a better position to implement step “c” (below).

- c) If the dog fails to respond to your physical presence, then add verbal encouragement (e.g., ‘hup-hup-hup’ or ‘hey-hey-hey’) to entice the dog toward the fall area – but don’t wait too long with young or inexperienced dogs (re: it may be difficult to get and hold their attention after they have given up on the bird). Also, avoid saying the dog’s name or giving commands like “here” when helping.
  - d) If the dog ignores the initial verbal encouragement, use a duck call or, if necessary, a shot (be prepared) to attract the dog to the fall area. Be aware of situations where there is a competing attraction (e.g., old fall, live-flyer station) that may require you to step in sooner or use more enticement to get the dog back to the fall area.
  - e) It may be difficult to locate the bumper or bird in heavy cover – **don’t waste time looking for it** – have a bumper handy that you can drop once you get the dog back to the general fall area (encourage the dog to find the bumper). If the dog finds the original bird/bumper – great, just pick up the second bumper after the dog starts back toward the line. Obviously a water mark may be different (unless you can walk on water) – see step ‘f’, below.
  - f) If all else fails pick up the bumper/bird and throw it up in the air while giving verbal encouragement and, possibly, a gunshot. Alternatively, throw another bumper (the one you have in your pocket or at the ready). This is a last resort on land, but often the only option on water. **If you throw a bumper or bird, make sure the dog is looking at you!**
  - g) Note: occasionally you will encounter a dog that has little to no experience with bird boys, duck calls, etc. and they typically do not react as expected to being helped (i.e., they ignore it or, in some cases, they shy away from a bird boy trying to help them). As Evan Graham would say, “train the dog your training.” In this case, helping the dog to successfully complete the marked retrieve is not the primary focus per se. Instead, the short-term goal is to teach the dog to be comfortable with bird boys in the field and to begin to learn the cues to being helped. Thus, similar to puppy training, you may have to get overly excited, throw the bumper/bird up in the air (several times), and encourage the dog to come to you and to eventually fetch the bumper/bird.
5. In some cases ‘helping’ means not letting the dog get the bumper. For example, if a dog breaks (in training) and is on the way to the mark and cannot be stopped, try to beat the dog to the bumper or bird (but don’t get hurt or get in a fight over it, and don’t scare the dog).
  6. Finally, if a dog is being helped out repeatedly (within and among sessions) then the trainer/handler should be asking themselves why. More often than not, the handler is asking too much of the dog (given their current training and skill level) or is consistently underestimating the technical challenges in training setups. Regardless, the solution is to *simplify* the tasks to ensure success and then build on that success (**training vs. testing!**).