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Rating Test or Hunt Test?

“Why don’t you bring your puppy out to the rating test and see how he does on birds?” Weimaraner breeders often say these words to new owners, and for many newbies, it leads to their first competitive dog event.

The Weimaraner Club of America (WCA) Shooting Rating Tests give dogs the opportunity to demonstrate field performance at three levels of increasing difficulty. The first level, Novice Shooting Dog (NSD), is the least demanding. It relies heavily on the dog’s hunting instinct and measures skills that overlap with those required in the AKC Junior Hunt Test for Pointing Breeds.

At a recent rating test, I got to talking to a fellow who was recruited to be a gunner. He didn’t own a Weimaraner, but had other sporting breeds that he ran at AKC Hunt Tests. He was curious about how a rating differs from hunt tests.

To explain the differences, I contrasted the test requirements of the WCA NSD Rating with those for the AKC Junior Hunter (JH) test.

There were more similarities than differences. Both the rating and the hunt test required a demonstrated desire to hunt, boldness and initiative in searching for birds, and reasonable obedience to commands. Gun shyness was not to be tolerated for either.

There was divergence when it came to pointing. In the WCA NSD rating test, the dog must point, but even a flash point is acceptable, while for the AKC hunt test the dogs must hold point until the handler gets within normal gunshot range. Another minor difference is that the time given to demonstrate these skills is 20 minutes for the rating and 15 minutes for the hunt test. The biggest difference was that to earn the NSD title, the dog only has to compete and pass one test, while the dog has to run in and pass four AKC Junior Hunt Tests to receive the JH.

The curious gunner listened politely, and then he observed that with the exception of the dog having to run in four tests for the JH and do a little steadier pointing, the events were remarkably similar. He shook his head and asked, “Why do you even bother holding ratings when hunt tests are available?”

Why? My personal opinion is that the beginning level rating test provides a golden opportunity to encourage owners to participate in field activities – especially new owners who have no previous experience. Ratings give Weimaraner breeders a chance to encourage these owners to try fieldwork in a relaxed, “you only have to do it once” setting. This is especially true for the folks who mainly show their dogs and, while interested in the field, are not about to try entering a more stringent form of field competition.

Ratings are sometimes criticized in Weimaraner circles as being too easy. "It's a 'give away' title," some say. I totally disagree and rather consider the NSD Rating title as a stepping stone to other field endeavors.

The proof of this is that many owners who have participated go on to the more advanced ratings and to AKC hunt tests. Leafing through a recent copy of the *Weimaraner Magazine*, I looked for dogs with both show and field titles and I noticed that rating and hunt test titles often appear hand in hand at the end of a dog's name.

Let's provide new owners with a way to succeed, even if it is only in a small way, and they'll get hooked on the sport of dogs.

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