

A Newcomer's Guide to the NAVHDA Natural Ability Test

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This brief overview is intended to supplement, not replace, NAVHDA's *Aims, Programs and Test Rules*, which you hopefully have read. Better still, you might have attended a NAVHDA Handler's Clinic, which I consider invaluable.

First of all, WELCOME! We, the chapter members, who put on NAVHDA tests, go to all that trouble - not for themselves, but for the breeders, owners and handlers of versatile hunting dogs whatever the breed.

Most of the time, we enjoy the challenge, the camaraderie and watching the dogs work but most important, we want the test to be enjoyable and successful for both you and your dog.

Rare is the chapter that makes money from a test. Usually, the costs of the test exceed the revenue (judges' travel takes a big bite out of the local bank account) and chapters have to come up with funds from other sources. NAVHDA sets strict limits on the number of dogs that may be tested on a given day to ensure that each dog is carefully evaluated by the judges. In the relatively simple Natural Ability Test, a maximum of 10 dogs may be tested on a single day. When the Utility and Utility Preparatory tests are included, fewer dogs may be tested based upon the mix of dogs entered.

Every dog runs by itself (except in the biennial Invitational Test) and is evaluated by all three judges who must then agree on the dog's score at each step of the test. If you've tested in the AKC system, you might have received radically different scores from each of two judges. That can't happen in NAVHDA.

The judges are very special people. They give freely of their time to come and judge. They receive no pay and get only their expenses reimbursed. NAVHDA testing is not competition. The judges are happiest when they are able to award good scores to all the dogs.

Normally, the judges will ascertain whether the handler is a novice and offer assistance accordingly.

Becoming a NAVHDA judge is not a simple matter. Judges must first attend seminars and serve apprenticeships (all at their own expense) before they are approved. Additionally, each test must have a senior judge who has even more experience.

Remember: They WANT you and your dog to do well. They probably will offer suggestions from time to time (which a wise handler will heed), but always, ALWAYS they are there to answer your questions as well. Reticence is not in order if you have a

question about the way the test works, JUST ASK. Not only won't the judges bite your head off, but they will be pleased to help.

Before we get into the test itself, let's consider a few more points.

Relax! That's not always easy, especially when you feel that you and your dog are on display. Everybody wants a good score, of course, but the dog is going to do whatever it's going to do regardless of how nervous you might be. The worst case is when the handler's nerves are passed on to the dog.

Dogs (as well as their handlers) can have bad days. When that happens, just make the best of it. Perhaps you can enter another test close by. Every dog that passes deserves congratulations.

Many people, when they are not the active handler, like to walk with the dogs during the search phase. This is allowed provided the handler and the judges agree. If you want to walk along with a dog during the Utility and Utility Preparatory Tests, you MUST wear blaze orange because live ammunition is used. Safety ALWAYS is the primary consideration.

The Natural Ability Test consists of:

- Search and Pointing
- Swimming
- Pheasant track
- Physical examination

Additionally, the dog will be evaluated on Use of Nose, Desire to Work and Cooperation, based upon performance in the other phases. Also, two blank shots will be fired at the beginning of the search to test for any gun-shyness.

The physical examination is part of the dog's permanent NAVHDA record and is important if the dog is to be used for breeding. Besides the physical attributes, temperament also is noted.

The portions of the test can be run in any order at the discretion of the senior judge. Moreover, all the dogs to be tested on a given day might complete the water portion first. That might mean that Utility Test dogs and Natural Ability dogs might all complete the water portion before any of the dogs move on to the search, etc.

Additionally, the running order published by the test secretary is just a suggestion to the senior judge who can and probably will modify the order, particularly if one or more bitches in season are entered. (They run last for obvious reasons - be SURE to notify the senior judge if you have a female in heat).

The important thing to remember is that one should plan to spend the entire day at the test REGARDLESS of the published running order. After the test, the judges hold their final conference and the scores are announced.

Now for the test. Remember: Relax!

In the Natural Ability search phase, the dog is expected to search diligently for game for at least 20 minutes and point what it finds. The judges will ensure that the dog is in an area where it can pick up the scent of a bird.

Wait for a cue from the judges before rushing in to flush the bird. (hint). The handler does no shooting of live or blank ammunition in the Natural Ability Test.

Don't yell "Whoa" or anything else at the dog to make it point. The judges want to see if the dog will point and not just stop on command. (This IS a natural ability test, after all). The dog doesn't have to be absolutely steady, but must be convincing that it actually is pointing the bird.

In general, the less said, the better. Let the dog do its stuff.

At the water, the handler throws a retrieving dummy out far enough for the dog to have plenty of swimming depth. The dog doesn't actually have to retrieve the dummy, but it does have to swim. If the dog won't swim for a dummy, a bird is thrown out. The dog can pass if it retrieves the bird, but the score suffers.

Normally, the physical attributes are checked while the dog is wet from the swim. (Hopefully wet, that is).

For the pheasant track, the flight feathers are pulled on a cock pheasant, which is then shoed to run off into some cover out of sight of the dog. The dog is expected to track the running bird a reasonable distance. It is not necessary for the dog to catch the bird and retrieve it (or even extra credit) but it's always satisfying for the handler.

Again, the judges will help the beginner. They will ask whether the handler wants the dog to see the bird before it is released. Some dogs get fired up if they see the bird first, but others might become overly excited and want to run and search rather than methodically following the track.

That's all there is until it's time for the judges to read the scores.

Finally, the judges will be available immediately after the scores are read to explain the scores given your dog. Remember: All three judges agreed on the score you received. Everybody wants to do well, but if you don't get a perfect score that means all three judges agreed that something was lacking.

Ask immediately while the day's events are still fresh in the judge's minds. Otherwise, the judge (who are just as human as the rest of us) probably won't remember the details that they wrote on the judge's cards that were sent to NAVHDA headquarters.

Good luck.

Many thanks to Phil Swain, a *very* senior NAVHDA judge for his contributions to the above