

Your Decoy Selection: A Recipe for Success V.2.0

Thad Peterson, NARA Director of Decoys

This article is a revised version of one I wrote for the NARA Newsletter a couple (or a few?) years ago, but after that length of time, it was in need of updating. I would encourage every prospective decoy and current decoy who plans to participate in a selection in the upcoming months or years to give it a read. I hope you find it useful!

Since 1999, I have taken part in numerous French Ringsport decoy selections in the capacities of decoy candidate, Judge helper, handler of a dog or dogs, and part of a super-selection jury. One fact that has become most obvious to me is that participants aren't clear about what is expected of them in selections. My hope is that this article will help to alleviate that problem.

Before I begin, though, I would ask you to keep in mind that because there is a general lack of clarity related to decoy selections outside of France, opinions differ on some of the topics I'll address here. Nevertheless, assuming you have the necessary physical skills and knowledge of the rules, this article should help guide you through your next selection with flying colors!

Let me start by laying out the two fundamental attributes that a decoy candidate must possess for success in a decoy selection:

SAFETY—This cannot be over-emphasized. If you are perceived as being unsafe for the dogs, you will NOT be selected. Along the same lines, if your skills aren't sufficiently developed to work the dogs safely, you should postpone attempting to select until you can ensure the safety of both the dogs you work in the selection, and yourself.

GOOD ATTITUDE/PRESENTATION—Think in terms of presenting yourself to the selecting Judge as if you are interviewing for a job, with him or her as the potential boss. You have to demonstrate to him why it is that he would want you to work for him, which is exactly what a decoy does.

Attitude/Presentation:

Starting with the second main attribute (attitude and presentation) first, it can be broken down further into several sub-parts.

First of all, you must keep in mind that the Judge is in no way obligated to select you as a decoy. I have witnessed more than one unsuccessful selection that may have gone differently if the decoy candidate had displayed a more accommodating and responsive attitude to the Judge. If you can't convince the Judge that you will do your utmost in a trial to comply with his wishes, your chances of being selected are slim to none. Having said that, it really isn't that hard to present yourself positively to the Judge; I have yet to meet a formative Judge that was anything

but reasonable when conducting a decoy selection.

Second, it isn't enough to just display a pleasant and compliant demeanor to the Judge; you must also demonstrate to him that you understand when the rules require you to look to the Judge for his authorization to execute different portions of exercises. You MUST NOT forget to do so.

Some examples of this are:

*Waiting for the Judge's signal to begin the exercise on the downfield attacks. Once positioned at the 10-15 meter line to begin the exercise as directed by the Judge, you must wait for his signal before beginning to try to lure the dog off the line of departure and running downfield.

*Waiting for the Judge's signal to make your escapes during the attack with revolver (but NOT during the escort!).

*Waiting for the Judge's signal to make the initial escape from the blind – if the dog doesn't bite – during the search and

escort exercise. Then, you must wait for the Judge's signal to begin each of the escort segments themselves. With this exercise, though, you must demonstrate that you know you DON'T need authorization from the Judge to make your two escapes during the escort.

*Waiting for the Judge's signal to initiate each of the three approaches to steal the object in the object guard exercise.

Attitude and presentation take on many other forms in a decoy selection, too. Selecting Judges want to see a good overall level of energy from the decoy candidate--Judges don't like to stand around waiting for their decoys! Decoys need to report out to the judge at the end of each exercise to assist the judge in determining the number of extra bites, changes of bite, seconds slow to out, and depending on the judge, maybe even some idea of the meters of escape.

While it is important to jog/run quickly to the Judge after each exercise in a selection to report out to him, this jogging/running back to the judge must be balanced off against the need to be able to work the dogs consistently. You don't want to run completely out of steam

before the selection is over. Hurry efficiently, reserving enough energy so you can finish the selection with a consistent level of work from start to finish.

Along the same lines, it's very important to ask the Judge for certain information. This most often becomes an issue when decoy candidates fail to ask questions related to the search and escort exercise. You MUST ask the Judge what blind he would like you to work from unless you've already seen that the other decoy candidates have already been using a certain (possibly marked) blind. There is a good chance that the judge will want you to ask what general route he would like you to follow during the escort, and where he wants you to finish (which is almost always the presentation circle that is painted on the field). It



Decoy Josh McCleary looking to the judge for the signal to begin the escort. Photo by Laura Centeno.

also doesn't hurt to ask if there are approximate areas in which he would like you to make your three escapes during the escort, but it isn't really necessary.

One thing that is very important is that you don't give the Judge the impression that you think you need his authorization for the regular escapes DURING the escort. The escapes during the escorting portion of the exercise must be completed when you—the decoy—feel that you can take the most meters from the dog. Your test is to pick the proper moments to escape when the dog is inattentive or when he distances himself from you so that you can take the points (meters) from the dog. Of course, the highest degree of skill and professionalism can be exhibited by walking in a fairly normal fashion—the rules say at a steady pace—and then still be able to escape at the right moment and with sufficient intensity and speed to be able to take significant meters from the dog. Herky-jerky walking and overt messing with the dog are against the rules, and show a lack of skill.

Keep in mind, the Judge will probably make some of his strongest assessments of your quality and potential based on how you deal with his requests for you to adjust your work. In most cases a decoy candidate will not make it completely through a selection without having the Judge tell him or her how he would like to see things done differently, or that he or she did something wrong. When the Judge tells you something like this, it is your opportunity to win the Judge over by displaying your good attitude, so seize the opportunity! What I mean is that **in many cases, your responsiveness and reaction to adversity is what the Judge is truly looking for, not the underlying issue brought up by the Judge. Keep a good attitude and accommodate the wishes of the Judge, and you will probably win him over.** Display a bad attitude in this context, and you will likely not be selected.

Remember, the judge has no obligation to select you as a decoy, and when he does, he is putting his stamp of approval on you. Often, judges err on the side of withholding the selection of a decoy about whom they have ANY reservations related to attitude, even if the decoy may be acceptable in terms of physical skill or experience.

Safety:

To switch gears now, I'll address the area that is truly the absolute priority over everything else—SAFETY.

The safety of the dog is the paramount concern of a good decoy, even above the safety of the decoy himself. If a decoy candidate can't embrace this concept 100%, he or she shouldn't attempt a selection. This pledge to the safety of the dogs is an obligation the decoy has to himself, the dog, the dog's handler, and the sport of French Ring!

Now, having said that, what does it mean? It really means that **the decoy must do his absolute best to keep from doing things that could injure the dog in a significant way.**

It is necessary to say also that this objective has to be balanced against the necessity of impressing and menacing the dog with the body and stick as allowed within the confines of the rules--the decoy may, and in fact *shall* in some cases, utilize APPARENT violence. Under no circumstances, however, may he or she use ACTUAL brutality against the dog. In this explanation, the contrast between the words "APPARENT" and "ACTUAL" is the most important part, which is why I have them

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in all capitals. The pertinent point is that **the decoy must be an actor, who can convey malice to the dog, without resorting to actual physical brutality.**

Not only will the use of actual brutality with the stick or by any other method cause you to be dismissed from a decoy selection; it is in fact the mark of a relatively unskilled and in-artful decoy. In essence, it is shameful.

Some specifics related to safety:

*The gun is often misused by inexperienced decoys in the heat of the moment, and can get you into a lot of trouble in a selection or for that matter in a trial. Remember that other than the two shots fired while the dog is coming downfield on the attack with revolver, all the other shots are fired as the dog takes the bite, or immediately thereafter. It is imperative to point the gun up, and fire it as far away from the dog (and your ear) as possible. Lazy work with the firing of the gun is unacceptable and dangerous.

*The fleeing attack is a very difficult attack to execute safely for some people, and requires a commitment level that is unparalleled in the other exercises. The difficulty comes from the limitation that only a small angle from straight ahead to get out of the direct line of the dog's momentum is allowed during the fleeing attack, and the safe absorption of the dog's momentum must be accomplished mainly through the decoy's acceleration. The decoy must be able to quickly accelerate to a high running speed, and must be capable of falling in a way that is safe for the dog while moving very fast.

--For our larger stature decoys, physics makes this even more
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important. Your physical mass means that a dog will incur more impact when running into you than when hitting a smaller, lighter decoy. The dog is therefore more likely to be injured if your technique is off by only a little. Luckily, many of you can really move in the suit, but you have to consciously extend yourselves to your maximum! I've witnessed the tragic consequences of a big decoy who didn't take enough care to absorb a dog properly, a proud Ring 3 dog crippled on a ring field from a spinal injury, squalling in pain. I am committed to keeping that from happening again, and no one reading this article should ever have to suffer the burden of knowing that he or she injured a good dog.

--The decoy must not only sacrifice his own safety as necessary to protect the dog when falling down during a flee, it is also imperative to keep track of the orientation of the dog's body if a fall turns into a tumble, in case the dog's neck gets twisted. In a French Coupe a few years ago, the decoy—JM Alan—actually executed a somersault to untwist the neck of the dog that was biting him. While that was heads-up decoying of the highest order, ordinarily it is better to simply do nothing to make the situation worse, and let the dog change his grip.

--Barrages behind the back are no longer legal during the fleeing attack. Also, you must take at least two steps after the dog has bitten before delivering the first stick hit. This is a very good rule in my opinion, since it helps decoys avoid allowing their upper body weight to be held too far toward the back, which often causes dangerous tumbles.

For a full description of how to properly execute a safe fleeing attack, please refer to my letter in the NARA Newsletter for the 3rd quarter of 2009, or view it online at:

<http://hammerhauskennel.com/FleeAttackTechnique.pdf>

The use of "Main Force" is prohibited. In practice, this means that once the momentum of the dog from the initial entry/bite has been absorbed, the decoy must try to keep the feet of the dog on the ground, and may NOT swing the dog in the air by lifting, by centrifugal force, or by twisting the suit in the dog's mouth.

Stick hits with the end portion of the stick tend to be more painful and brutal than impacts from the middle or handle end of the stick. The latter type of stick hits allow the stick to flex around the dog's body, which maintains the APPARENT violence, but reduces the actual brutality of the stick hits. The possible exception to this statement is the case of an 80cm stick, that can actually wrap so far around the body of the dog that it can whip the dog in the legs or underside.

Equipment:

Equipment plays a part in both your presentation and the safety of the dog and you. Obviously, your suit is your most important piece of decoy equipment. Many people have achieved success in Level-1 decoy selections wearing ill-fitting suits, but it is difficult. A properly fitted suit of a competition or semi-competition/semi-training weight not only creates a better appearance, it also allows for better speed, better stamina, better esquives, and better stick work. All of these benefits of a proper suit result in better safety for decoy and dog.

Shoes are also very important equipment for decoys. Many decoys prefer soccer shoes (with non-metallic cleats), as they tend to be lightweight, provide good grip, and their low foot height



and narrow base width help to minimize ankle twists. Ironically, many of the other shoes that appear to provide protection from twisted ankles actually seem to cause more of them. I can explain why I think that may be in a little more detail, but that's another whole article.

Sticks are critical pieces of equipment for a selection. As of the most recent rules revision, they need to be within 65-80 cm in length, 20-25 mm in diameter, and split into 6 sections for at least 3/4ths of the length of the stick. A new requirement in the last French Book of the Decoy is that the sections of the stick must be flexible enough that they can fan open to at least 20cm during the barrage. **Once a stick is split, the edges of the individual sections should be carefully smoothed to minimize the potential to accidentally cut the dog with the stick.**

To-Do's:

Up to this point, much of this article has focused on prohibitions. There is a good reason for that in any adversarial and competitive relationship such as in French Ring where the elemental contest is decoy against dog. Restrictions are placed on each of the combatants based on the level of competition, and for that reason much attention must be given to prohibitions.

On the other hand, after all of the time spent on the "Don'ts", here are some items that are definite "Do's."

At the basic level, after the ability to work the dog safely, the next requirement for success in your selection is the ability to regulate your level of work. Ordinarily, you will be required to execute some Brevet or Ring 1 exercises, and some Ring 3 exercises. Quality Brevet or Ring 1 work needs to be sufficiently active and interesting to the dog, and yet be relatively low-threat while the dog is on the bite.

On the other hand, for Ring 3 attacks, the parameters are much wider. Within the bounds of safety and non-brutality, you should be able to make a valid attempt at an esquite, and if you are successful, you may try to execute a safe and legal, lateral deflection of the dog's direction of travel with your arm—commonly referred to as a "scoop"—to allow you to gain additional no-bite time, thereby taking points from the dog. This is touchy business in a selection though, as these lateral deflections ("scoops") can easily become illegal if the angle of the arm is wrong, the timing is off, if the dog's head receives the impact of the deflection, or if the hand or stick pushes the dog by accident. **To be sure you are fully aware of all of the pertinent points related to legal and illegal scooping, be sure to carefully review Section 4.3.1 of the NARA Rulebook.**

When demonstrating your object guard technique, you must remember that your objective is to steal the object, not to entice the dog to leave it! It is important to show the selecting Judge three distinctly different approaches to try to steal the basket. The approaches don't have to be terribly effective in terms of stealing the object for a Level 1 selection, but they must show variation. For a Level 2 selection, the Judge will probably want to see that you can read the dog well enough to really test his object guard, although it seems that for the purposes of a selection, variation between your three approaches still takes precedence over effectiveness.

Also on the object guard, remember to freeze immediately when bitten. You must remain frozen until 5 seconds have elapsed, the dog outs, or the dog changes his bite. **Keep in mind, that if the dog changes from the initial bite to a secondary bite location within the five seconds, the decoy is expected to immediately begin to move away from the object as if the dog had released the bite and returned to the object, dragging the dog with him.** If, after the five seconds if the dog has not released the bite, you must move away from the basket, dragging the dog with you if it does not release its grip and return to the object. Some judges will be pleased to see you allow the dog to drag you around (away from the basket to take the dog's points), so that you can help the dog to be intent on staying in the bite and losing points. When the dog outs though, you may not work to stay between him and the basket—you must proceed outside of the 5 meter radius circle. You are not obligated to get out of the way of the dog when it goes back to the object though, you just can't keep trying to get in its way.

On the attacks, when you hear the horn authorizing the out, start planning to freeze up on the command to out but be SURE not to freeze on the horn. Just as the Judge doesn't want to see you freeze on the horn, you MUST freeze on the command to out. Again, if the dog has not released the bite within five seconds of the last command, begin to work the dog again. Ordinarily the handler will give another out command before 5 seconds elapse, but you have to be ready for that possibility just in case.

You must understand that most Judges expect you to stop on the 40-meter line for the attack with revolver, but stop wherever you happen to be when he honks the horn during the face attack.

To help you to locate the 40-meter line, here is some information about the layout of the trial field:

The field is laid out with four main lines across it. Between two of these lines there is a distance of 30 meters, and between the others there are two 10-meter distances, for a total of 50 meters between the outside lines. Sometimes the field will be laid out

with one 10-meter segment on each end, and sometimes the field will be laid out with both of the 10-meter segments on one end, and then the 30-meter segment comprising the other end.

When working the attack with revolver exercise, you need to make sure you stop on the line that is 40 meters from the line of departure. That means that between you and the line of departure, there will be the big gap (30 meters), and a small gap (10 meters) for a total of 40 meters.

Try to show the Judge some variety in your work during any individual attack. Show him that you try something to see if you can make an impression on the dog, and that if it doesn't work, you try something else. I have seen decoys that simply hit the dog with the stick continuously for 15 seconds. Not only is it normally completely fruitless, it is ugly work, and it shows a lack of imagination on the part of the decoy. I like to use the term

"in-artful" to describe this type of work. Don't be in-artful; be full of art in your work, especially in how you convey your menacing presence to the dog!

For a Level 2 selection, things get a bit more serious. You really need to have a proper trial suit, be in even better shape, and have significant experience as a trial decoy. In most cases, if you are truly qualified to attempt a level 2 selection, you will already have been encouraged by people you know to "go for it." You're still not expected to be super-human to achieve Level 2 decoy status, so don't stretch your capability too far and risk failure. A good, solid performance from a skilled, experienced, and athletic decoy will earn a Level 2 selection status almost every time!

Lastly, and this is a biggie, **KNOW THE RULES OF THE GAME!!!**

The following links contain necessary study materials:

<http://ringsport.org/Rulebook2009.pdf>

hammerhauskennel.com/frresource.htm

So there you have it. . . I hope that this article will help our future NARA selections to be even more successful

than our past selections (which have really been pretty good on the whole). If you have any questions or comments please feel free to contact me! peterson@hammerhauskennel.com



Decoy Manuel Montero waiting for the judge's signal to make an escape. Photo by Shelley Nelson.

Know the rules... Flee Attack

4.1.6 The Fleeing Attack begins with the decoy at a distance of 10 meters from the dog. The judge will authorize the handler to send the dog when the decoy has advanced 5 meters. The decoy must accelerate immediately in order to catch the dog near the 30-meter line. Additionally, the decoy must take a minimum of two steps after the dog has bitten before beginning his or her work with the baton.