When Rabbits Designed Lure Courses

by Patricia Gail Burnham

" . . . how does one design a course plan to simulate a rabbit run? It is easy: 1. Use the longest possible initial straight; 2. Follow it by a series of turns (5 to 8); and 3. Follow those with another long straight to test endurance."

In the (good?) old days, back in 1972 or so, when lure coursing was started, most of the people involved had graduated from open field coursing and were running their dogs in both sports. Their actual hunting experience influenced both the early course plans and the judging. These people knew what was required of a dog in a successful rabbit course. They relied on that knowledge when it came to lure coursing; and they set out to design lure courses that would simulate live coursing, and test the same qualities in a dog that it would need for real hunting.

Then lure coursing spread to areas where coursing live game is illegal, or impractical; and people who have never seen a rabbit run by hounds took to designing course plans and judging. The similarity between lure and classic coursing diminished. In live coursing, the rabbit and the dogs design each course plan and, while each one will be slightly different, there are basic similarities that underlie all the courses. These are the things that early lure folks tried to design into their course plans which have been lost lately. This is a pity, because a properly designed course plan can simplify the judging, speed up the trial, decrease the number of reruns needed, and improve the dogs safety.

For folks who have never seen actual coursing, an explanation is in order. Anything can happen once the dogs are slipped; but more courses follow a fairly fixed pattern: the rabbit is given a head start and the dogs are slipped. With the exception of Salukis, the dogs sprinting off the start are going to show the most speed available to them. Their first goal in the course is to overcome the rabbit's lead. If they are not fast enough to do that, the rabbit will simply run away from them, and it wins. However, usually the dogs will manage to overtake the rabbit after a very long straight run (called the run up) in which they and the rabbit all get tired. The fastest dog will get close to the rabbit. At that point the rabbit will start a series of turns. Rabbits weigh less than dogs, so they can turn quicker than the dogs. Each time the rabbit turns, it will gain ground on the dog closest to it. This gives the second and third dogs a chance to gain ground in the turn by cutting the corner. Passing in a turn like this is not going to help their score since it displays neither superior speed nor agility. In this part of the course, the rabbit will use a series of turns to test the dogs' agility (this is called working the rabbit).

There are rarely more than six or eight turns, during which the dogs and rabbits get even more tired. Then, one of two things will happen: either the rabbit will tire or make a mistake and be caught, or it will wear the dogs down enough so that it can safely try to run straight away from them once more. This is the final part of a course (generally called a tail chase). The dogs are determined not to give up, but may be too tired to force another turn; so you will see a tired rabbit leading some very tired dogs off into the distance. (Here is where Salukis are the exception, because at this point in a course they may start running their strongest, shift into high gear and look like they have decided to get serious. This is the part of the course where a talented Saluki will demonstrate its special skills. There are Salukis who just cruise through the early part of a course and then begin to sprint at this point.) It is

in the last part of the course where endurance is tested, while exhausted dogs try to force one more turn on a tired rabbit.

For most breeds, speed is demonstrated and mostly judged during the run-up; agility is best demonstrated in the middle of the course while the dogs are working the rabbit; and endurance is displayed in the final tail chase. Why does this matter when it comes to designing plans for lure coursing? If there are a bunch of sharp turns right at the start of a course, the fastest dog may never have a chance to display its speed as it overruns the corners and loses the lead at each pulley. By the time it reaches a straightaway, where it could use its speed, it may have learned to hold back, waiting for the next turn. It may also be injured in the early turns, where stress fractures are likely. If the dogs have a straight run-up, and have a chance to blow off their early speed and intensity, they will be using less stress in the turns when they come to them and reduce their risk of injury. Dogs that have just been slipped are running very hot and their judgment is not the best. They will run straight through barbed wire fences at this point, while later in a course they would notice the hazard and handle it safely. The same applies to sharp turns, where some breeds of dogs can turn so strongly that they can fracture their own legs. It is not necessary. Given an initial run-up to let them demonstrate their maximum speed, the dogs are then running slower and more reasonably, and staying closer to the rabbit when the turns take place.

So, how does one design a course plan to simulate a rabbit run? It is easy:

1 Use the longest possible initial straight,

2 Follow by a series of turns (5-8), and

3 Follow those with another long straight to test endurance.

When the course is reversed, the finishing straight becomes the run up for the reversed direction and the preliminary run-up becomes the endurance straight.

Is there anything you need to know about the turns? For one thing, rabbits generally turn from 15 to 90 degrees from their old direction. In normal running they NEVER turn more than 90 degrees for a very good reason: it would take them toward the second or third place dogs who are, at the moment, cutting the corner to reach them. Rabbits are not stupid enough to run toward dogs. They never turn the 135 degree turns that are so dear to the heard of some lure operators. Why are lure operators so fond of them? It beats me. What such a turn does is break the stride of the lead dog and let the slower dogs cut to take over the lead. That makes the judge's life more complicated.

There are two foolproof ways to handicap and break the stride of a good, fast dog. One is to use turns in excess of 90 degrees, especially at the end of a long straight so the fastest dog is leading by a good distance. The second is to set a 90 degree turn close to the start so the fastest dog is flying off the corner while its slower or wise course mates are cutting to take the lead.

What happens when a hard running dog has its stride broken? When a dog has been running for a while, it is using the action of its stride to help it breathe. The expansion and contraction of the stride assists the diaphragm muscles in forcing air in and out of the lungs. In order to do that, its breathing has to be in rhythm with its stride. When a dog is crunched in a corner and has to slow way down, turn, then accelerate again, its stride is slowed; and during that period, it is not going to be able to breathe as often or as deeply as when it was running straight. What happens is that its oxygen debt increases, and the dog feels like a marathoner who has, in their terms, "run into the wall". The dog feels terrible and will not feel right again until it has gotten back into an extended stride and run for some distance. A dog coming out of such a corner looks like it is hurting, and it is. The real problem, though, is that the dogs who followed it into the corner had room to cut, ran a smooth turn, did not break stride, and will not only be in the lead but they will be feeling just fine. A really

keen dog who gets hurt often enough by this kind of turn may learn to avoid the pain by holding back and not running full out, or it will watch for turns and practice cutting. Why should we punish the very dogs that we should be rewarding?

Difficult corners can make the judge's job tough. If the judge knows what has happened to the lead dog and scores it high because it lost the lead to lure operation and course design, not to greater speed or agility, the judge may well award the course to a dog who as only led occasionally. Knowing when to do that is the judge's job; but it is easier to judge a course that does not handicap the fastest dogs. A good course plan simplifies judging by making the best dogs apparent to all the watchers, not just the sophisticated ones.

One last word about turns: lure machines can zip the lure around a pulley without slowing it down at all so the lead dog has no warning of the turn. Rabbits, on the other hand, have something called inertia and momentum. They cannot change direction instantaneously. They have to slow up first. They have to change their ear and tail positions, which warns the dog of the coming turn and gives the dog a chance to start to slow down. The first warning a dog has of a lure turn is the moment the lure rounds the pulley. That is no warning at all. What can we do about that? Setting an extra pulley in a sharp corner helps. If we set two pulleys at a 90 degree turn, the dog can start to turn when the lure hits the first pulley. Actually, a lot of corner problems could be solved by adding pulleys. You say that your club does not have enough pulleys to use two at a corner? The solution is easy. Decrease the total number of turns in the course. You don't really need many to measure agility and follow.

The shape of a course plan can determine who wins when the dogs are running it, so there is a more serious reason to design course plans that resemble rabbit courses. The coursing breeds were created by being selected to successfully run their native game. If they start competing under other criteria and are selected for success under different conditions, then the breeds are going to change. I rather approve of what hundreds of years of coursing rabbits and other game have created in my own breed. I would hate to see it changed by people who did not understand the interrelationship between coursing hounds and their prey. These dogs were not designed by artists to romp with Icart models*. They were created by selecting for coursing qualities which we can simulate in lure coursing if we take the time to obtain a good sized field and the care to design the course plan properly.

** Louis Icart was a French Art Deco era artist known for drawings of glamorous women, often erotic or mildly humorous in tone. [VF-S]*