

Cedars Point Development Guide

Preparing for NAVHDA Natural Ability Test

Purpose

To prepare your dog to demonstrate natural ability clearly with the right balance of independence and handler support. The goal is not to train for the test, but to allow the dog to show what is already there.

Why It Matters

The NAVHDA Natural Ability Test was developed to evaluate inherited traits in young dogs before training begins to influence behavior. Dogs are judged against a standard - not each other. There is a developmental window: if testing is scheduled too early pups typically lack exposure; if tested too late they can look or become mechanical and less expressive. Early exposure often determines how clearly a dog can demonstrate their natural ability under evaluation. When exposure takes the form developmental exposure dogs are influenced by these experiences.

Reference Materials

Aims & Rules Book:

<https://www.navhda.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/02/Aims-Programs-Test-Rules-Book.pdf>

NAVHDA Natural Ability Video:

<https://www.navhda.org/testing/natural-ability/>

Prepare your pup by:

- Prioritizing exposure over development, training or control
- Running your pup in areas where there is opportunity to experience real game and natural scenting opportunities
- Encouraging independent hunting, searching, and problem-solving
- Introduce field, track, and water exposure as naturally as possible
- Run your pup alone and frequently to build independence and cooperation
- Work on and nurturing the pups recall

Prepare Yourself

- Review the Aims & Rules and NA video above.
- Learn what and how your pup will be evaluated, what is not being evaluated, and when to handle - or stay quiet.

Things to What For

- Lack of forward, purposeful search
- Poor bird contacts affecting intensity of point
- Weak track commitment or inconsistency
- Hesitation or lack of confidence in water
- Lack of clarity or understanding of the task at hand

Common Mistakes

- Overhandling or interfering with developmental exposure
- Entering a pup too early without enough exposure
- Entering a pup too late after trained behaviors become mechanical
- Running a pup on poor birds prior to testing
- Trying to fix problems immediately before the test

What a Good Field Looks Like:

- A pup who uses a forward and expanding, purposeful search
- A pup who demonstrates productive use of nose locating, and pointing birds
- Efficient location of game under hunting conditions
- Pointing should: convincing, intense, and productive
- A pup who demonstrates cooperation with independence

What to Look for in the Track

- Repeated recognition or acknowledgement of game track
- Forward progress
- Concentration and determination
- Problem-solving without handler help
- A dog may lose and reestablish the track; abandoning the track and transitioning into a search is not the task being evaluated.

What to Look for in the Water Element

- Willing entry
- A pup who enters swimming depth two times
- On-demand performance in unfamiliar water

Bumpers evaluate willingness to swim. If ineffective, a bird may be used:

- Two immediate and consecutive swims are required
- Pup must reach swimming depth both times so the throw is critical when a bird is used at water

The swim - not the retrieve - is evaluated.

Common Score Reductions Across Elements

- Scooping or catching birds
- Lack of cooperation (self-hunting)
- Abandoning the test discipline being evaluated
- Failure to demonstrate water entry on demand repeatedly
- Not performing the task at hand, or performing it at a deficient standard
- Lack of clarity or understanding of purpose

Judges evaluate overall performance. The pup does not need perfect repetition; it must demonstrate the behavior consistently enough to show clear understanding and ability.

Cedars Point Perspective

Natural Ability should not look trained. There is a balance between exposure and interference. A dog that is overly handled or trained may appear mechanical and limit its ability to demonstrate natural ability.

More is less.

If your dog is pointing, tracking, or swimming - stop. Let the test reveal the dog. The test does not create the dog - it reveals the dog. You owe your dog the right experiences developmentally.