



ASK THE PRO

starting cold blinds

By Danny Farmer

BEFORE I EVEN CONSIDER starting a young dog on blinds, *I make sure there is a very solid foundation in the dog's basic training.* This means he is well force broke, collar conditioned and has spent a long time mastering the double-T. He should be forced from your side, forced en route to the back pile and casting to two sets of overs.

The first thing I do after completing the double-T is to teach the dog handling and casting wagon wheel. This is a drill with eight bumpers spread out like a clock. You first teach the dog to line each of the bumpers. The distance here is about an easy toss of a small white bumper away from the center point of the clock. Use

white bumpers in short grass so the bumpers are easily visible to the dog and work very hard to teach the dog to heel both clockwise and counterclockwise. Also, be very precise in staying exactly on your center pivot point. This will force you to make the dog heel with you and move with you; not you moving to the dog.

Next teach casting wagon wheel. Use the same white bumpers and the same distance as lining wagon wheel. Start with three bumpers, the back and the two overs. This should be easy because the dog has just completed the double-T. The biggest change is that you now demand that the dog turn left on a left back and

right on a right back. There should be no collar pressure on this drill. Either handle the dog or “no” him and recast to correct mistakes. If mistakes persist, mark the spot by tossing a bumper to the location of the cast he misses.

Next add the two diagonal backs, one at a time. After the dog understands the left and right diagonal back, mix in straight backs and overs, always casting sequentially (back to diagonal back, diagonal back to straight back, diagonal back to over). Once the dog has mastered these five casts, add the left and right come-in over and straight come-in (you must move your position on the straight come-in so you are behind the bumper).

Concentrate on the five cast wagon wheel (back, diagonal backs, and overs). Once the dog has mastered the casting drill you are ready for your first cold blind. Go to a plain field and avoid complicated terrain, cover, etc. Place three blinds with three white bumpers at each blind about 150 to 200 yards from the starting line. Make these bumpers very wide spread. Send the dog for the middle blind. Do not attempt to fine line the dog, just sit him down facing the general direction of the blind and send him off.

The dog at this point in his training does not understand much, if anything, about being lined, so trying to get him to look out exactly where you want will only make him nervous. Just put your hand down and say “back.” The only pressure you want to use at this stage is to correct for a no-go and to correct for not answering the whistle. Remember, this is a very scary time for the dog. At this point his only exposure to “back” is the double-T and wagon wheel. In both cases he knows the location of where he is being sent.

Now you are pointing him out in a big field and demanding he charge out into the

unknown. If the dog heads out anywhere in a forward direction that is perfectly acceptable. At this point you handle the dog. Have a very wide corridor to your blind, you just want to get him to the blind any way you can. Your only concern is that the dog go somewhere when cast and that he stop on the whistle. Do not use collar pressure for anything other than not stopping or not going. Do not worry if the dog is slow and unsure at this stage, it is very normal. Speed will come when the dog becomes familiar with cold blinds.

As the dog proceeds out toward the blind you follow him out in the field. Although the blind is 150 to 200 yards away, you will be within 50 to 100 yards of the dog because you are walking out toward the blind as the dog is going away from you. At this stage you do everything possible to help the dog. Give big helpful casts, not the subtle casts you use for a more advanced dog. Once the dog gets the blind you stay out in the field to receive him. Try to position yourself on line to the blind about half way between the starting point and the blind. Have the dog facing you and step 10-20 yards away from the dog and cast him back toward the blind he just picked up. If he takes off and heads for the blind he just picked up let him go. If you need to handle him, that is OK. If this goes well, back up closer to the starting point and repeat the back cast.

The reason you do these repeats by casting as opposed to lining is that casting momentum is something that needs to be developed at this stage. Usually a lack of momentum on casting is the weakest link at this point, so it is the thing we want to work on. If this first blind is not overly troublesome, go ahead and do the second blind in the same manner. If the dog had a lot of trouble on blind one, quit for the day.

It is very important that once you start

cold blinds you do them every day (or at least 5 days a week) for a couple of weeks. Each day start with a short review of casting wagon wheel (5 bumper version) and then go directly to your cold blinds. Try to work up to 3-5 different blinds per day and phase out the repeats as the dog starts to do better.

The reason I emphasize cold blinds as opposed to sight blinds or permanent blinds at this stage is that the fear of the unknown (a cold blind) is the biggest hurdle to overcome. Starting cold blinds right after completing the double-T, where the dog was forced on back, forced en route and stopped on a whistle, gives you the tools you will need to transition to cold blinds. These tools needed to meet the usual stumbling blocks on blinds (not going, not stopping, and popping) are fresh in the dog’s mind. This should help him to understand corrections he gets for those issues and bridge the gap between the known (the double-T) and the unknown (the cold blind).

The emphasis on cold blinds rather than permanent blinds or sight blinds is because I feel handling as opposed to lining is the key to a good blind running dog. Lining and momentum will come as the dog gets comfortable with the cold blind environment. I want the dog to get comfortable taking 40 whistles on a blind at a young age, this will be more important in the long run. ■

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Danny grew up with a love for dogs and training them has been a lifelong passion as well as helping others train and compete with their dogs. Since 1981 Danny has competed in every National Open. On average, he has qualified 5 dogs per year and tied the record for number of qualifiers with 9. Danny has won 3 National Opens. He holds the record for winning more Opens than any other professional trainer including an amazing 18 Open wins in a row. Danny lives in Anderson, Texas and retriever training continues to be his passion. <http://dannyfarmer.com>