



## ASK THE PRO

### how to prevent and cure head swinging

By Ed Thibodeaux

HEAD SWINGING occurs when your dog anticipates the next bird sequence of multiple marks. This will usually create marking and memory problems since our retriever is not watching the complete flight of the bird from bird thrower to ground.

There can be several causes of head swinging. Often there is a combination of factors. Too many multiples and not enough singles and too fast a cadence when presenting multiple marks are the most common causes of head swinging.

As in most things, balance is very important. Multiple marks are important of course since there are skills that need to be performed well as memory. But, a fair number of single marks off of multiple gun stations should be part of your regular training regiment as well. Strive for good balance between multiple marks and

single marks off of multiple gun stations.

When throwing singles off of multiple gun stations pay close attention to your dog and keep him focused on the station throwing the mark. Refocus him if he pulls off the mark before you are ready to release him. If you are having trouble keeping your retriever focused your helper could get his attention with a “hey hey” or some type of movement. Whatever it takes to keep the dog focused on the mark. I strive to keep my dogs focused for an 8 to 10 count before I release them to recover the mark.

An advanced dog that is more willful and determined to move to the next mark can be corrected with a sit/nick with your e-collar or sit/stick with your healing stick. I personally prefer using attrition if at all possible but will correct with indirect pressure

(usually with a sit/nick) if attrition fails.

Pay attention to detail while throwing singles. As well as helping with head swinging, singles offer an opportunity to work on the finer points of handling on the mat, such as your timing and movements, proper positioning of your retriever to see the marks, and excessive movement by your retriever on the line (which could be an underlying cause of head swinging). A member of the Retriever Field Trial Hall of Fame recounted to me his memories of field trial greats that he had known and seen compete over the years. “They were perfectionists at the line!” He commented how these great competitors, more often than not, would beat you at the line because of their attention to detail at the line. They did all they could to help their dogs see marks.

When presenting multiple marks to your retriever incorporate the same methods used for single marks. Keep the retriever focused on the bird thrown. Slow your cadence as you present subsequent marks. A judge in a field trial or a hunt test may call for marks with a 3 to 5 count cadence but during training maintain an 8 to 10 count before moving to or cuing for the next mark. Once all your marks are down wait your 8 to 10 before releasing.

An additional thing we do when presenting multiple marks is “double pumping” one or two marks, especially critical marks. “Double pumping” is throwing the same mark twice before proceeding to subsequent marks. We will call for the mark, our helper will shoot and throw, then, before moving to the next mark we will have the helper throw a second bird without a shot. If enough “double pumping” is done it will become easier to keep your retriever focused on the mark since he may come to expect (or at least suspect) that another bird may be presented. On difficult memory birds this has an added benefit of aiding memory. Also, with young dogs just starting multiple marking, “double pumping” gives the youngster two opportunities to see the same mark and it can make a more pronounced impression on him.

If you are a hunt test enthusiast and feel you must present marks from hidden gun stations you can either have your helper come out to help keep your dog focused or you can have him just make some noise from his hidden position. We can have him give a “hey hey” or blow a duck call to get the retriever focused on the mark if he swings off of the mark.

Many of us use remote controlled bird or bumper throwing devices. Help from these devices will be limited to attention getting sounds or launching another mark.

To summarize, stay balanced between single marks off of multiple gun stations and multiple marks. Keep your dog focused on the bird thrown for an 8 to 10 count. Movement from your helper or attention getting noise from your gun station can be used (especially with younger dogs). Indirect pressure can be used on more willful and determined dogs. Slow your cadence when presenting multiple marks. ■

## Ed Thibodeaux

Ed Thibodeaux has been training retrievers since 1979. First as an amateur, then later as a professional. He is very active in the Hunting Retriever Club, AKC retriever hunt tests and field trials. He and his wife Jackie own and operate Satin Belle Retrievers in Morse, Louisiana.