



Photo by Molly Schlachter

## ASK THE PRO

### when do we step in?

By Tim Milligan

DURING THE COURSE of training retrievers on marking set ups, a trainer may question whether they should help their dogs on a particular mark or sit back and allow them to dig out the birds.

We all know that training dogs is more an art than a science, so there are no black and white rules. Many variables arise such as what a particular dog needs, at that moment, versus keeping the standards of training high. I will point out some generalizations of training on marks that I utilize on a day-to-day basis.

First, I would like to point out that all guns and marks should be very visible to the dog. This is what allows the dog to mark and it is very hard to evaluate the needs of a dog on a particular mark if he cannot see the gun or the bird.

Second, I like for my marks to require the dogs to make decisions en route to the bird. Many factors will effect a dog's line to the bird and these factors include, but are not limited to water, wind, terrain, obstacles and other guns/marks in the field.

With this in mind, let's discuss some general rules for when to recall a dog, when to handle in the field, when we have the gunner help and when we should just sit back and allow the dog to get the bird on their own.



### When To Recall

There are few situations where I will recall a dog back to the line and re-send to a bird. The situations are applicable to both multiple mark scenarios and single marks off multiple guns. If a dog leaves the line and changes his mind shortly after the send, or makes a conscious decision en route to one bird to go for another, I will generally recall the dog to the line and re-send for the bird I want him to retrieve.

I do not always like to recall for an isolated poor initial line to a bird in the field. If there is a ditch close to the line I am sending from, and a dog squares that ditch but quickly re-establishes the correct line to the bird, this does not qualify for a recall. To compete at a high level in Field Trials, our dogs must learn to negotiate such obstacles and continue on to the bird. It would not be prudent to think that every bird can be laser lined with all the factors judges can put in a

dog's way, such as a brush pile. Our dogs should learn to negotiate these deviations in their lines and continue on to the bird.

Please keep in mind that a recall, especially from a long distance, can be a form of pressure on a dog. For some dogs, the "mental" pressure of a recall can actually be worse than collar pressure. Too many recalls can and will erode a dog's momentum and confidence. Don't be opposed to simplifying a particular mark after one, or more, recalls. Simplifying can include having a retired gunner stand up or re-throwing the bird.

I currently have a 5 year old Field Champion that I know I can count on one hand how many times I've recalled him in the past few years. He is a smart and sensitive dog, and I could quickly create unwanted issues by too many recalls (no go's, popping, lack of style, etc.) on the other hand, I am not opposed to

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recalling a “fire breather” as many times as I need to get the effort I’m looking for in the field on a mark. What works for one dog may not work for another and it is important to recognize each dog’s individual need.

## When To Handle

I like to handle on a mark in the field when I feel the dog has quit putting forth an effort to fight the factors on the way to the mark. I will only handle as many times as needed to re-establish the mark and to fight the factor that required me to handle in the first place. It is worth repeating that these factors can include the suction or flare of other marks/guns, wind, terrain and sometimes just lack of focus by the dog. I believe that water is the most difficult factor we see in training and during trials.

Whether to correct the dog after a handle for not fighting factors is dog dependent. My general rule is not to correct on the first whistle unless a well-schooled dog is blatantly lacking effort. This could include a dog making some fancy sideways dance moves to avoid water on a mark when he has been thoroughly decheated. In this scenario I would stop, correct and cast the dog into the water. In most handling scenarios on marks I do not correct the dog on the first whistle. A dog that continues to avoid putting forth an effort after handling may deserve a correction depending on his age and level of training. A good example of this could be a dog fading with the wind on a mark and then refusing to take a cast into the wind thereafter. I like to say, “the first whistle is on me” in cases such as this, but then I expect the dog to dig in and try harder.

Some examples of scenarios in which to handle your dog:

### 1) *Getting out of the water early on a stand up, down the shore water mark*

I like to handle a dog on his intent to beach early at the moment he makes his intention known. I will generally not correct after the first whistle, especially with a transition level dog just learning this concept. I will consider having the gun throw another bird to re-establish the mark after the handle, particularly for young dogs, to remove all doubt in the dog’s mind where I would like him to go.

### 2) *Going back to an old fall*

As mentioned in the previous section, I will recall a dog if his intention is to return to an old fall shortly after I send him or he makes a big, bold move to go there en route to the mark.

With this said, I think there are two situations we can see a dog returning to an old fall. One is a willful decision made on the part of the dog to return to the old fall and the other

is a dog “stumbling” into the old fall because of tight lines and/or marks.

Both training and trial tests require a dog to be comfortable running tight to old falls and sometimes to go very close past one gun while on the way to another. It is not always the obvious choice of a dog to return to the old fall. My school of thought for teaching dogs how to negotiate these difficult factors (tight lines and marks): I will most often handle a dog out of an old fall to the bird I sent him for if he just happens to end up there and does not make the willful decision to go there in the first place. I do not always correct when this happens, especially on a younger dog, as I don’t want a dog to be uncomfortable running the tight lines we demand of them. It is hard to teach a dog to pick up a “momma” bird off the “poppa” flyer station when he has been corrected near guns too many times.

### 3) *Hooking a stand up gun*

Good training requires setting up good tests. I think a good trainer has the ability to set up tests that requires effort and decision making from the dog each and every day. A well-placed bird will require a dog to fight factors and make decisions. If a dog is going to hook a gun, I know it is because of a lack of effort to fight the factors to the bird, whether it be fading with the wind, not holding a hillside, etc. In that vein, I will often handle a dog for hooking a gun because something caused him to be back there in the first place.

### 4) *Hooking retired guns*

I don’t know that a dog can really hook a retired gun. However, some holding blinds are placed so conspicuously it may as well be a gunner sitting out in the field. I actually like to teach my young dogs to do retired guns by using obvious holding blind placement. If the holding blind is obvious, especially to an older dog, I will handle for whatever factor or lack of effort that caused them to go behind the holding blind.

## Repeating

There is considerable debate on whether to repeat or not repeat, I do repeat at times. But I do not repeat when the dog simply has a bad mark. I will repeat if a learning opportunity is available to the dog in how to fight factors.

## When To Help

Help can come in many different forms to a dog. We can have a gunner stand up, have a gunner re-throw, have a retired gun un-retire and variations of the above. I will use parts or all of these variations depending on what is needed by the dog on that mark on that day.



In some situations the need for help arises when a dog has reached the area of the fall, can’t come up with the bird and starts to lose contact with the gun and wanders out of the area of the fall. I will have the gun help to get the dog’s attention back to the area of the fall and then allow him to re-establish his hunt.

Help can also come when the dog is on the line and not just out in the field. If a dog is foggy on the retired mark from the line, I'm not opposed to having the gun un-retire or even throw another bird and then retire on the send. If a young dog is unsure about the memory bird of a double due to his inexperience, then why not have the gun stand up and get the dog's attention? When in the business of teaching, there is no harm done in simplifying to whatever degree necessary to allow the greatest learning experience for the dog.

### When To Just Let Them Hunt

Most importantly we need to consider the weather and the temperature in any of these scenarios. It could be potentially deadly to a dog to allow him to do an extended hunt on a hot

day with high humidity. Safety of the dog always comes first.

With that said, I let a dog hunt for a bird when he is putting forth a reasonable and intelligent effort to find the bird, and is not committing any sins in the meantime.

Long hunts teach dogs perseverance. We've all been there when a dog is putting on a painfully long hunt, but rest assured the dog actually learned something when he finally finds the bird after an awesome display of fortitude.

If a dog leaves the area of the fall at any time during the hunt (rambling hunt or switching to another fall), then I will have the gun help to keep him hunting, but not necessarily put him right on the bird. An older dog in this scenario may deserve a whistle-correction before having the gunner help in the case of a definite switch

to another bird.

Before you do anything in training to assist your dog (re-call, handle or help), it is always helpful to ask yourself one question: Am I Teaching The Dog Anything? If the answer is "no," or "I don't know," then best to sit back and let your dog figure it out. ■

### Midway Retrievers Tim Milligan

Tim Milligan started training retrievers in 2000 and began Midway Retrievers in Midway, Texas in 2008. Most recently Tim qualified 4 dogs for the 2012 National Retriever Championship. Tim and his staff train dogs at all levels from gun dogs to Field Champions.

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