



Photo by Molly Schlachter

ASK THE PRO

developing marking

By Bill and Becky Eckett

This "Ask the Pro" is the first in a series of four articles focusing on Developing Marking written by Bill and Becky Eckett of Blackwater Retrievers in Centerview, Missouri. Please look for future Developing Marking discussions in the coming months.

THE FOUR FACTORS OF MARKING:

1. Hunting the Area of the Bird Properly
2. Taking a Proper Line to the Mark
3. Memory Marking
4. Understanding Marking Concepts

It is very important to keep each of these factors in balance through training. Certain times you will be more focused on one depending on the point in training you wish to address. While the factors may not be sequential, it may be necessary to accomplish one before moving to the next.

Hunting the Area of the Bird Properly

Let's first address *hunting the area of the bird properly*. No dog is a pin point marker 100% of the time. Just as Babe Ruth did not hit every pitch thrown at him, no dog will mark all the birds precisely every time. It can be a winning attribute to have a dog that has learned to go to the area and persevere until he finds the mark versus the one who unravels because of a poorly developed ability to hunt the area of a fall.

When we are first presented a young dog for training we ask the owners to tell us, or better yet, show us the strengths and weaknesses of their dog. More times than not, the owners will quickly tell us how the young dog can do a mark 200 plus yards. And once they begin to stretch the marks out, they rarely go back to shorter ones. Precision should be the objective. Given the efforts in breeding our Field Trial Labradors, it is not difficult to teach a dog to run a distance. It is challenging however to teach a dog to run a great distance and be precise in hunting the area of the bird properly. There is always a tendency for people to stretch the young dog out too quickly. Many times in stressing distance, they have sacrificed teaching the young dog how to mark the area of a fall in a confident and intelligent manner.

Dogs naturally have a tendency to use their noses for guidance and information. Many dogs tend to use only their nose when hunting. It is a skill they have practiced since birth, before their eyes even opened. So we need to encourage them to develop the use of other senses to orientate themselves to the mark. The dog that has been encouraged to use his eyes, nose, and develop an intelligent hunt pattern has a greater chance of success. Hunting the area of the bird properly is all about teaching a dog to use as many senses as he can to gather information for a successful retrieve.

Developing the area of the fall is more important to teach at an early age than practicing distance. Varying the distance of the gunner is more important than teaching long marking distances and staying long. Observe your dog on a mark and recognize when he needs help in hunting the area of the fall. A dog that primarily uses his nose will go where he thinks the mark is. If he does not come up with the

mark, the hunt pattern becomes a wider and wider loop. He is only using his nose and not his eyes or senses to find the bird. At that point we may go to drills developed to emphasize using his eyes and sense of orientation to the gun station. It is very important when teaching marking to use down wind marks; that is having the wind at your back, so as not to reward the use of the nose. It is also critical to make sure the object thrown is highly visible. White if thrown against a dark background and dark if thrown against a light background.

Consistent marking also has a great deal to do with how well the dog has been taught depth perception. We believe it is very important to use flat throws in training. That is, the gunner throws the mark perpendicular to his body, not angled back. A flat throw at a shorter distance is more advantageous to keeping the young dog focused on the object being thrown versus on the thrower. A mark that is angled back tends to keep the gunner in the line of site to the mark. A young dog with limited attention span will more likely benefit from the flat throw that will allow a slightly longer look at the arc of the throw and will certainly cast his gaze away from the gunner.

We want the young dog to approach the mark with his focus away from the gunner by using a flat throw. He will approach the area of the fall using his eyes to look for the object and his nose to orient himself for a successful mark. Remember DOWN WIND marks are extremely important to emphasize the use of eyes. We use long flat throws, with white bumpers, in very short cover at first, and as down wind marks. You do not want crosswind marks because the scent cone could give away the bird and reinforce his use of nose. The objective is to make the mark obvious so he has success as soon as he is in the area of the fall. If you are using birds, attach streamers or whatever will enhance visibility.

Once a young dog has the mechanics of the retrieve down and can properly execute a retrieve and return to the handler without hesitation, we can do drills that will enhance his ability to hunt the area of a fall properly.

One exercise we use is the In Line Singles Drill. You will need one gunner on foot or four wheeler. The distance from the line to the mark should be no more than 100 yards. As the dog progresses you can vary the distance.

Order of distance would depend on what you feel needs to be addressed. For a dog that hunts short, you would start the marking drill short and progress to longer marks. If the dog tended to hunt deep, likewise, you would start long and work in. If the dog hunts deep, start at 100 yards, assuming a line is running north – south; flat throw right to left with the line to the mark straight down wind. After the dog picks that up, the thrower comes in about 35 yards. Again a flat throw of a white object, short cover and down wind but this time left to right. If the dog has difficulty, hunts deep or goes to the area of the old fall, have the gunner help out right away and repeat. When successful, the thrower comes in another 35 yards, this time with a flat throw same as first time – right to left. Have gunner help and repeat if necessary.

If you have observed the opposite problem of hunting short the procedure would be the exact opposite. If the dog got in trouble and in this case didn't drive, the gunner would help the dog out by throwing (no movement towards the fall). And repeat if necessary.

As the dog becomes proficient, distances can become greater but continue to use flat throws. Distance will add its own level of complexity. If you recognize the dog marking off the gunner, start bringing in the gunner until the dog has more success recognizing the area of the bird. Obstacles can also be introduced – changes of cover, terrain, etc. Marks however will always stay down wind with flat throws. Dogs naturally tend to use their noses. This drill will hopefully encourage the use of their eyes and teach intelligent hunts.

There is no doubt that our greatest markers have the best eyesight. They also possess the ability to use their combined senses if they need to hunt the area of a fall properly. These dogs will come up with the birds the quickest even if they have deviated from the line or gotten to the area of the fall and need to hunt the bird. That is because they have learned to use depth perception, their eyes, their nose and their abilities both trained and innate. ■

Blackwater Retrievers Bill & Becky Eckett

Bill and Becky Eckett have run Blackwater Retrievers in Centerview, Missouri, since 1987 specializing in field trial retrievers. They have developed over 85 field champions, qualified over 250 times for Nationals and won 2 National Opens, 2 National Amateurs and a Canadian National Open.