



Photos by Kim Katzenmeyer



ASK THE PRO

training retrievers for field trials and hunting tests

By Bruce Halverson

DETERMINING from the beginning what it is that you want from your dog is essential to set the appropriate course of training. To build a hunting test and field trial dog you will need a hearty, well bred pup from reputable lines with a proven background of marking and trainability. Spend as much time as you can socializing your puppy introducing him to the things that he will see in the future... cover, water, decoys, people, and other dogs. Take him everywhere you can. Be safe and have fun.

A solid basics program is an essential foundation for work in either game. If you cannot make the time commitment, let someone help you. Take your time and

don't rush through it. There are many good programs available...pick one and stick to it. Key elements to building the dog you want are solid obedience, collar conditioning, force fetch, swim-by and pattern blinds. Be patient and don't cut corners.

Pups would ideally be exposed to early marks from visible guns. I like using white coats but anything they can pick out works. Start short and work longer as your pup progresses. Having your gunners ready to help is critical. Work with your gunners so they know when to help with singles, doubles and triples. Have a plan and be specific to each day, week and month of what you want to work on. Be flexible as it will change as

your dog advances. Start with a lot of singles from multiple stations advancing to wide open multiples with gunners ready to help on memory birds. You want to do everything you can to let your dog know there is a bird out there to retrieve. Building confidence is critical to making it easier to talk your dog into a memory bird in the future.

Blind drills are great! Repeat, repeat, repeat. Use blind drills to teach your dog to run past, through, behind old falls and gun stations. This is an easy way to build comfort and confidence on blinds. A dog started out being comfortable near and around old falls (without going back to them) will run straight and be confident. Use bumpers on

short falls and birds for long falls until your dog understands the concept. Have them run past birds at short falls when they are more skilled and can handle running past the scented area. Handle through the drill if you have to. Use no pressure until you know they have it down. Be careful of corrections. Remember, repetition is important.

Starting blinds in the field should follow a strict diet of pattern blinds with diversions, running past old falls, behind guns, through old falls, and under the arc of a fall. Use bumpers for diversions until your dog has the concept understood then add birds and flyers. Use known blinds, shown blinds, everything you can to build confidence and comfort with blinds in the field for your dog. Blinds with marks are the game. Dogs will always be influenced by old falls. Build trust and teamwork with your dog and you will be able to reinforce concepts when it is necessary. Cold blinds should follow...short, 100-150 yards using blind stakes and big orange bumpers with no cover. Lengthen blinds and add cover strips/terrain/wind gradually when you are ready. Dealing with and fighting factors is a big component of the game. Be fair and patient. Handle if necessary. Move towards your dog when they have difficulty. Distance introduces the need to fight factors. Deal with

it fairly and make observations as a handler of the factors so you can help your dog. Repeat and run blinds often. Instilling marking and blind concepts while fighting factors can only help you in your future endeavors with your dog. Determine what your dog is not doing well and review them in blind drills... castaway drills, no-no drills, swim-by on days when you have little or no help.

Using duck calls, remote sits and walk-ups in drill situations will make it easier for your dog to understand when in the field. Continue to reinforce obedience both on and off the field.

Setting up a water tune-up where you have regular access for repetition is extremely beneficial. Use 6-8 blinds with a variety of concepts...long straight entry, short angle, cut corner, long angle, on-off points, and channel out. All of these concepts are used in both field trials and hunting tests at a variety of lengths. Drills will build confidence and make you and your dog comfortable.

Now it is time to put it all together for field trials and hunting tests. Again, use a lot of singles off of multiple guns. Mix up the routine...long, short; long outside; outside middle; long retired; short retired; medium retired; out of order flyers; interrupt marks with blinds. Be fair and have gunners help

or be ready to handle if necessary. Increase distance with success. Tighten marks when your dog gains confidence. Be sure to give your dog plenty of birds and flyers out of the picture. Flyers should be a reward as long as your dog is steady.

Extremely long singles using a flyer through old falls or even first through your short stations will help your dog be comfortable running through short falls. Teach your dog to look long, check up. Use primary and secondary selection. Help your dog as much as necessary especially near the area of a fall. Your dog has to be comfortable going where you send him...fundamentals are everything. Doing singles well will help your dog fight factors on memory birds. You will eventually practice multiples with your dog to give him a chance to put it all together but singles will be a constant through your training together. ■

Crosswind Retrievers Bruce Halverson

Bruce has been training professionally since 2000. He has a kennel and training grounds in Brooklyn, WI and Cairo, GA. He provides training for basic obedience and gun dogs. In 2011, he qualified six dogs Qualified All-Age and 10 dogs for the Master National Retriever Club event. He has worked with many dogs that advanced to become FC-AFC titled, National competitors and finalists.