



ASK THE PRO

going to the bird

By Mark Madore

AS A PROFESSIONAL trainer I hear many people talk about what their dog is doing at five, six, seven months old, etc. and most of the time people are equating yardage distance while retrieving. Have you seen the Classified Ad for a pup that can do singles to 150 yards and doubles to 75 yards? It all sounds great, but a 150 yard single in the mountains might be a lot different than a 150 yard single in the prairies. Not all marks are equal! Field Trial marks can be long but usually there is more to the marks than just distance – bird placement is key and good judges use the available terrain, cover, wind, water, etc. in their bird placement to let the best markers shine. So, while training your young dog, let's create good habits of going to the bird and not get caught up in distance!

Wherever I'm training, I like to keep in mind one simple rule – *Go To The Bird!* Even before the youngster is handling, you can move the line up or over so this simple rule can still be applied. Don't put a yardage distance on it, put

a “going to the bird” distance on it! Developing good marking habits at an early age will help in the career of your youngster. Good marking habits include watching the bird to the ground, driving to the area of fall, staying in the area of the fall and finding the bird efficiently. Use big square throws (90 degrees from gunner,) shoot at the top of the arc, use clip-winged pigeons, etc. to keep the youngster focused on the bird. This all leads to confidence in the dog and, when the youngster has confidence, the odds of being successful are much better. When the dog is progressing with good marking habits start mixing in angle back throws and more factors en-route to the bird.

If a young dog is stretched out too quickly bad marking habits can be formed. This can be an easy trap to fall into especially if the dog is full of energy and loves to go get birds. Bad marking habits include not watching the bird to the ground – the gunner should be a reference point not a crutch, wandering around en-route to the bird and in the area of fall –

remember confidence is key, blowing out of the area of fall – don't throw all marks at the end of the field, and not finding the bird efficiently – introduce birds in cover gradually so the young dog learns how to hunt efficiently. I'm not advocating to not stretch them out, but only stretch them out when good marking habits are displayed in previous sessions.

Gun running might also be thought of as a bad marking habit however, I believe there are two different types of gun runners, one type that uses the gunner as a crutch and the other type that uses the gunner as a reference. Two very notable dogs come to mind that were gun runners, NFC-AFC Chopper and FC-AFC Auggie, but both of these dogs used the gunner as a reference not a crutch. Having a youngster running at the gun as a crutch isn't ideal so when you're in a crosswind situation have the gunner throw the bird with the wind a majority of the time. By doing so, it will eliminate any habits forming of the youngster getting to the gun and smelling the bird which

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eventually could lead the youngster to using gun running as a crutch.

I like to use humans as bird throwers. So if a youngster is coming up short the gunner can say “hey, hey, hey” to get the dog’s attention and then throw another bird while en-route to get ‘em driving (make sure gunner tells you when they are down to three birds left in the sack and not just one bird left in the sack...) If this type of help is needed, often it is time to shorten up the marks, remember, building confidence is key, if the youngster doesn’t think he/she can do it odds are they won’t be successful.

On the other hand, if the dog is driving deep of marks or blowing out of fall area, the gunner can still say “hey, hey, hey” to get the dog’s attention. Usually, I don’t like to throw another bird in this situation because I want the youngster to have to think and relate to the gunner. You don’t want the youngster running around crazy, you want them thinking and alert. If this type of help is needed, too often it is time to shorten up the marks – sound familiar?

Throwing our marks shorter in training for a young dog builds confidence of going to the bird. Maybe we pattern the young dogs with long marks in the beginning because they have a lot of drive, we love to see them run and they throw long marks in Field Trials...I wonder why well placed short marks are so difficult in Field Trials? ■

Clearwater Retrievers

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Mark Madore owns Clearwater Retrievers LLC which focuses on training young dogs. Mark spent eight years as an assistant trainer for Jim and Jackie Gonja at McKenna Kennels, where he started-out 10 FC’s and/or AFC’s including 2011 NFC Emmitt along with numerous QAA & Derby List dogs. Each year, Mark spends eight months in Texas and four months in Montana. Visit Clearwater Retrievers at www.cwretrievers.com

