



# ASK THE PRO

## short bird success

By Danny Farmer

THE DIFFICULT SHORT BIRD is a key element to success in Field Trials and Hunting Tests. Accurately marking these birds can make or break your weekend, or National event.

There are several factors that make a well-placed short bird so hard. Some of these factors may be wind, location of the bird, relation of the bird to other birds thrown, relation of the bird to a flyer or terrain.

Wind is the number one factor because today's dogs are so well trained, and the handlers so precise, that if the bird is in a crosswind location we will pull it out time and again. If the short bird is placed directly downwind and in an undesirable location, they become very difficult for the dog to dig out and require a dog to accurately mark it. The common problem with short birds in competition is wind changes. It is not very often that a good short bird holds up all day due to changes in the wind.

Here are some tips to increase your success on the short bird.

### Teach with Success

To get a dog comfortably marking, and looking for, the short bird we should simplify the mark. There are many ways to teach a dog

how to mark the short bird. One of the most basic principals is to throw the mark first as a single and then incorporate your test around this bird afterwards.

As mentioned above, wind is the primary factor in the difficulty of a short bird. Placing the short bird, early in training, so that a dog will crosswind it will teach the dog more awareness that the short bird is there.

Leaving the gun out or retiring on the send is another good tool in training the dog on the mechanics of checking down. A dog needs to be successful when marking these birds in training.

### Focus

A dog needs to be focused on the short bird during a testing situation in order to accurately mark the bird. We can enhance their focus in training several different ways. Having your thrower shoot twice while throwing the bird will increase your dog's focus on the throw and the thrower's location.

In a testing situation, one wants to be very sure that the dog has had the opportunity to be shown the gun before calling for the birds. Short birds can be missed if a dog head swings from the long bird to the flyer on a triple. If

the dog has been given the opportunity to be shown the short gun, prior to calling for the birds, then you may be able to pull this gun out with the dog's knowledge of where the gun was standing.

Of course, in training, we would not allow head swinging off of the short bird to the flyer. If the dog did head swing, we can correct with the SIT command and implore the dog to focus on that bird for an extended period of time before calling for the flyer.

### Isolate the Bird in Training

Isolating the short bird, away from major influences such as a tight long retired or a flyer, will also increase your success. The gun should be attractive to the dog in relation to the other guns in the field. Make sure that the thrower is very visible in training, and that the bird is easily seen by the dog when thrown. Place the bird in an easier location until the dog becomes more aware of them, before increasing their difficulty.

### Relaxation

It takes a really good marking dog to precisely mark a well-placed short bird. The long bird is more about discipline, but to get the

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short bird, a dog has to really mark it. It is very hard for a dog to check down and accurately mark the short bird if they are uptight or nervous about digging this bird out.

We have to be very cautious not to make a dog uptight about the short bird. Dogs can blow through these marks because they are worried about it. Pressure will only increase a dog's worry. Pressure can come in many forms, not just collar pressure. Many recalls and re-sends can create immense mental pressure on a dog and it makes for better teaching to have the gun help a dog, or using a come in whistle, to get these birds.

## Handling

On that note, if the dog blows through the mark in training, there are several ways we can deal with this to create a teaching situation for the dog while not putting pressure on the dog. I don't like to blow a sit whistle if I need to help the dog with a short bird. Instead, I will start blowing the come-in whistle (toot-toot) to convey to the dog that he has gone deep and I would like him to start hunting back to me. Of course, I will need to handle the dog to the bird if he is off line and can't recover the bird with a come-in whistle. Another method of helping the dog is to have the thrower help from his holding blind, without stepping out, as a means to teach the dog to start looking for the hidden gun in the field. And of course, we can always have the gun step out and help the dog to the bird.

People ask me what I do in a given situation and there is no black and white rule. A lot of dog training is done on gut feeling and instinct. What is good for one dog (helping) may not be good for another (need to handle). Use your best judgment in being your dog's coach.

## Verbal and Nonverbal Cues

You can use several cues when sending the dog for the short bird. One major cue that we can use is our voice. Voice inflection is another tool in our arsenal as a handler. I generally send quietly for the short bird, and more loudly for the long bird. A quiet send communicates to the dog that we do not want him to go long. Some people use the "easy" cue before sending for the bird and when used consistently in training, can be another form of communication to your dog which bird you would like him to retrieve.

I generally don't use a hand when sending for the short bird. As I mentioned, the long bird is a discipline bird and we use a hand to convey to the dog to go straight and keep driving. I like to stay as uninvolved as I can on a short bird and encourage the dog to line up and mark it on his own. When I feel that the

dog has accurately marked the bird, I will send him quietly without using a hand.

## Drills

There are several drills you can do to improve short bird marking. One drill that I like to do requires only one thrower.

Place one or two stickmen out in the field at a long distance. Short of the stickman, have a thrower shoot, throw and retire into a holding blind. After the throw, I will toss a bird or bumper offline to give the thrower enough time to retire.

Pulling out this short bird, with the suction of white coats deep of the mark, can be very difficult. You can increase or decrease difficulty with your placement of the stickmen and awareness of the wind.

You can use this drill, other known drills, or come up with one of your own to address any perceived weakness in your dog's training.

## Practice Makes Perfect

You need to practice these birds a lot to get good at them. I once had a dog (FC AFC Trumarc's Runnin Rebel) that had an Open placement before he was brought into my camp. Until this dog was 4, he could NOT do a short bird. We kept at it and continued practicing until there wasn't a short bird he couldn't do. This dog eventually went on to win 7 Opens in one year. Due to patience and persistence, he became a very accurate and capable short bird marker, but it was not without a lot of practice.

## Overbalance

When working hard to increase your short bird success, be aware that there is always a give and take in dog training. Once you get real good at these short birds, the long birds can tend to suffer exponentially. It is okay, during the teaching phase, to have an overbalance towards success of the short bird until your dog becomes proficient at them.

## Secondary Selection

Secondary selection was created as a way to increase success on the short bird. It is very hard to check down on a bird after going long in MOST circumstances. Regardless of the order that the birds were thrown, we train to pull out the remaining birds from the shortest to longest in distance.

## Put them away Thinking about the Short Bird

While teaching, and especially the day before an event, I am conscious of the fact that I want to put the dog up with the short bird on his mind. It is counter productive to get the work in on a very difficult short bird in training, only to run a blind past it's location. It can negate the work you did that day on the short bird.

There have been many memorable birds in my career. One short bird in particular sticks out in my mind. At the 1989 National, FC AFC Otus of Redfern hit a short bird that it seemed no other dog in the Field Trial could do. I believe that his success on this particular bird was a large factor in his becoming the 1989 National Champion. It takes a really good marking dog to mark the short bird, and Otus could really mark.

I hope these tips are helpful and I wish you great success. ■

## Vinwood Kennels Danny Farmer

Danny began training dogs in the early 70's. He met Judy Aycok in the mid 70's and credits her for his success with dog training and Field Trials. He won the National Open in 1989, 1995, 2001 and 2013. Since 1981, Danny has competed in every National Open, averaging 5 dogs per National. NFC Timex and Danny still hold the record for the High Point Male Derby Dog. The High Point Purina Award has been won by Danny and his dogs 3 times. In 2011 Danny was inducted into the Retriever Hall of Fame.

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