



Photo by Molly Schlachter

ASK THE PRO

developing marking

By Bill and Becky Eckett

This “Ask the Pro” is the second 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. At 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.

Taking a Proper Line to the Mark

Teaching these factors is the foundation to encourage lifelong lessons built on success. In this article, we will address the importance of Taking a Proper Line to the Mark. Teaching through successes and keeping these factors in balance is critical to developing and maintaining your competitive retriever. It is very easy to become unbalanced when our tendency as trainers is to focus solely on proper lines and marking concepts throughout the dog's career.

We introduce teaching proper lines to marks when a young dog comes out of basics and has the mechanical skills of handling; lining is taught through handling. We feel it is clearer to stop and cast a dog via whistle verses putting the mental pressure on the dog to decide what went wrong (which happens when we recall).

We must remember that often the lines to the marks that we are trying to teach are unnatural paths for the dogs to take. The pressure on the dog to take a proper line to the mark can be one of the first lessons a dog will learn that is not necessarily natural for the dog (example: cheaty water singles).

We have to remember that teaching proper lines is taught through handling. Handling allows you the ability to stop the dog, communicate and direct him to the preferred line to the mark. Once he has been shown and taught, he will be responsible for holding the line.

The reason for teaching proper lines to marks is that a good field trial judge is going to incorporate good bird placement (the area of the fall) that will challenge a dog's memory while also incorporating a marking concept with an added degree of difficulty using the lines to the birds. The judge will make the lines to the marks difficult by adding obstacles; whether is be terrain, cover, wind, water or other natural obstacles. In addition, using lines that are angled through the obstacles will increase the difficulty because of the dogs natural tendency to square, deflect or avoid any or all of the obstacles.

When we start teaching the young dog how to take proper lines through these various obstacles, it is important to isolate and teach the proper response through one obstacle at a time. Each obstacle is first shown with the proper line. As the dog is successful and has been taught all the obstacles, (cover, water, ditches, roads, wind, terrain, etc.) multiple obstacles may be included. Once the dog exhibits the correct response to the obstacles, you repeat the sequence of teaching individual

obstacles using a line that angles to the mark. It is generally taught through drills, handling, and attrition before any collar pressure is applied. Always build on the successful mastery of the basic components before introducing the next level.

The line to the mark is the objective of our lesson, therefore, the mark itself becomes less important. In reality lines to marks have nothing to do with marking. When teaching proper lines to a mark, we should think of the marks as sight blinds.

When starting young dogs, it would be fair to salt the area or even have your gunner throw another bumper or bird when the dog has gotten to the end of the line. Remember, picking up the mark is the reward for the dog. It is important that there be no stress associated with this part of your lesson. You don't want to add stress by making him find the mark when our objective was the line because there may be mental pressure put on the dog on the way to the mark. Since we are focusing on the line, it does not need to be complicated by incurring a hunt when the dog finally gets to the area; the lesson is that he takes the proper line and the actual mark becomes secondary.

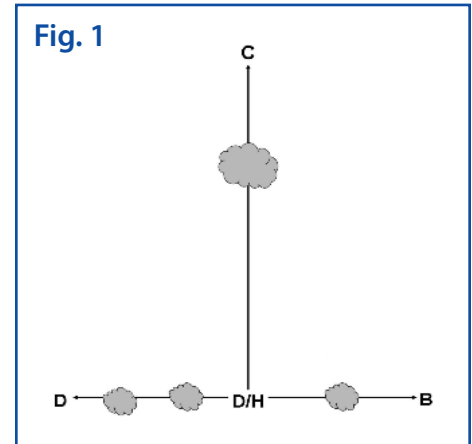
Picking up the mark should be the reward for getting there, not a point of added stress. By finding the bird quickly he gets out from under the pressure, whether mental or physical. When we begin to teach the angled lines, there can especially be a tremendous amount of mental pressure on the dog because this is not a line he would choose. No matter how simplistic it appears to us, we must be cognizant of how it appears to our dogs. We have begun the process of fine-tuning the manner in which a dog takes a line to the mark. In the dogs mind, there may be significant pressure trying to understand what you are asking. The value of getting the bird becomes the total reward.

Your training program should include teaching individual obstacles in the simplest form by incorporating drills in the yard and on pattern fields. Whether they are no-no drills, cheaty water singles, brush drills, etc. Remember the objective of the lesson; start simple and square, then gradually complicate the drill as mastery is attained.

For example, one drill we use to introduce a young dog on how to take a proper line through or over an obstacle uses a version of the 3-leg land pattern (Fig. 1). The young dog will already be proficient at lining and handling on the 3-leg. Brush piles can be added to simulate obstacles. We prefer to use cut willows or cedar limbs which are safer for the dogs to work around. The brush piles should be about 15 feet long, not very wide and with

the center of the pile being a lower and more attractive as a place to cross. Again starting at 90 degrees.

By knowing the drill in its simplest form, the dog can focus on the new challenge of the obstacle without as much stress. If the dog is sent and tries to avoid the brush pile, he is stopped, handled and if necessary, the drill is simplified to teach the obstacle without pressure. Using this drill, the young dog will learn to maneuver through an obstacle (line over it)



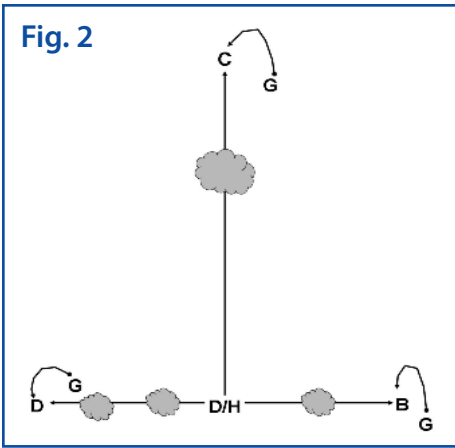
but just as importantly, the dog will learn how to stop and handle over the obstacle. Again it is our way of communicating with the dog that a whistle means, "No, don't go that way," and the hand signal is the direction to go. The whistle is the only tool you are allowed to use at a trial, why not practice using it?

After successfully lining over the obstacles people have a tendency to end the drill. We take it two steps further to make sure we are thorough on the brush drill before heading to the field. We play simple baseball (3 handed casting). And finally, add a gunner shooting and throwing a bumper to one pile at a time to see if the dog will stay on the proper line and go over the obstacle (Fig. 2). Often times a young dog will loosen up and try to avoid the brush pile in its haste to get to the mark. It is important not to "No" and recall but to try to stop and cast.

After these steps are completed and the young dog is proficient at lining and handling over the obstacles, you are probably ready to go to the field. At this point the young dog will have the tools and mechanics of the lesson so when you go to the field he will have some understanding of what you are asking.

Just remember, when you start in a cold situation in the field you will need to start simply and build through handling as the dog progresses. He will eventually be held responsible for the proper line and as he becomes more proficient we can add more obstacles. It never

Fig. 2



hurts to refresh the lesson with any of the drills you used, especially if there is a breakdown.

Teaching the proper line is but one of the factors to develop marking and an important one. If we get out of balance and put too much emphasis on the line to the mark, we risk making the young dog less confident to make the right decision in training or competition. It is extremely important to stay in balance. In reality when each of us cuts our dogs loose on a mark, the dog has to make the right decisions on his own using his memory, taking as close to the proper line as is possible and hunting the area of the fall properly. Hopefully our training efforts have built a level of success to support a confident response and achieve our goals. ■

Blackwater Retrievers

Bill and Becky Eckett

Bill and Becky Eckett have run Blackwater Retrievers in Centerville, 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.