



ASK THE PRO

decheating: be fair, be patient and teach

By Kristen Hoffman

THE OTHER DAY someone asked me when I started decheating. I looked at my assistant, Ken Dillard, and we both said at the same time, “at 8 weeks.”

Weather permitting (water temp at least 60 degrees), I like to get pups swimming and retrieving in the water. I’ll start with a gradual slope into the water tossing a small, soft bumper or floatable toy (fleece stuffed toys work well) and gradually get them retrieving from a splash depth, to tummy depth and then while swimming. I’ll throw from the waters edge, straight out and straight back, keeping the distance very short and the repetitions minimal. Just two or three throws at the most. As the pup matures and as long as the pup is coming back to me, I’ll have a bird person throw and then graduate to small, white bumpers.

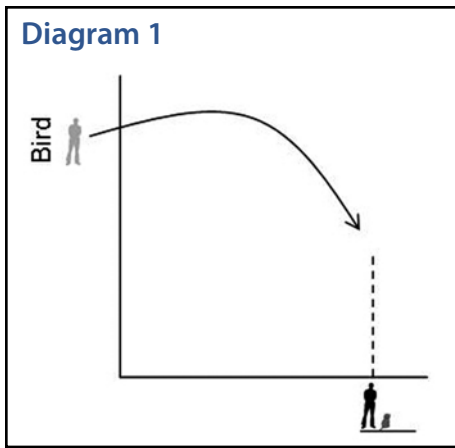
If the pup is not returning the bumper or running off with it, stop, wait until the dog is force fetched and collar conditioned. Otherwise you are developing bad habits. To make sure the pup returns to me, the

bird person will throw to a distance further from him and closer to me so that it’s more inviting for the pup to return to me. **(Diagram #1)** I never set up a mark where the pup would have any inclination to run the shore, just straight out and straight back.

As the pup continues to mature and I’m going through basics I will stretch the marks out and add another bird person. I

use big white bumpers. I want the youngster to have an obvious target. I now have the beginnings of two down the shore. The distance is very short, not much over 100 yards. **(Diagram #2)**

Once basics are done, I’m through the double T, swim-by, 7 day 7 bumper force to water, transitional blind work, I start rotating the marks, angle back towards the



shore. I'm still using big white bumpers, I still want a target. Eventually it becomes a splash on the water's edge and then finally on the shore. Once the mark is on the shore, I'll switch to birds. **(Diagram #3)**

Up to this point the youngster should be conditioned to one thing: swim straight to the mark and come straight back. However, this is the point, because of the angles, I may see a youngster think he can run around the bank or land behind the gun or at the gun. Bank running now becomes a deadly sin. I'll stop them. Nick them with the collar pressure that is appropriate for them along with a good verbal dressing down. Call them back and have the bird person re-throw.

My criteria for the dog picking up the mark is that he land in front of the gun one half the way between the gun and the mark. No less. I'll use attrition at first. Just stopping and casting, showing him what I want. I am not setting up marks with a strong cross wind as yet (wind blowing dog in toward shore). As we progress I'll use less attrition. Giving only one cast, then allow them to make the decision to land in front of the gun. If not, I let them land behind the gun, blow the whistle, stop them. Nick or burn depending on the dog. Call them back into the water and cast to the mark.

I try not to use pressure in the water with a youngster. But handling early can get hot. If found that using too much pressure or demanding a youngster stay in the water to the bird can give you a dog that's afraid to get out of the water.

If the youngster is not swimming straight back to me, the swim-by comes in now, stopping and handling out into the water.

Now is the point where I'll start setting up with a stiff cross wind. **(Diagram #4)** I want the dog to put his shoulder into the wind and stay in the water to the bird.

If the dog is now "honest," swimming by the gun to the bird, I'll start backing off the

water and setting up cheaty singles (marks that are placed with a shore or point or entry that invites the youngster to land or run around). I'll also start incorporating angle entries. **(Diagram #5)** If a youngster should make the decision to run around, I do not use attrition here. I stop them at the point where it should be obvious to them they have made a grievous error in judgment (I don't pick on their lines all the way to the water, but give them the chance to make a good decision). Nick or burn, call them back on line and cast into the water. They should stay in the water all the way to the mark. If they should decide to get out early, they suffer the consequences of yet another bad decision.

I've found that a young dog, though very honest on singles, becomes less so when relying on memory with multiple marks. I'll start multiples with silent re-throws on memory birds, then progress to cold doubles and triples handling or correcting as needed.

I never, and I repeat, never, set up contrary marks. A bird thrown up the shore rather than down. **(Diagram #6)** The dog must swim by the gun to get to the mark. Contrary marks reward the less watery dog.

Some dogs are better water dogs than others, easy swimmers who don't fight the water. Water is not a dog's natural environment. Everything you teach on land must be taught in the water. Too much pressure on land you'll have a dog that's afraid to get out of the water. Too much pressure in the water and you'll have a dog that won't get in. Be fair, be patient, and teach. ■

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Kristen Hoffman has been committed to training sporting dogs since 1971. In 1990 she started Heron Hawk Kennels and since then she has trained field champions, master hunters and family gun dogs. www.heronhawkretrievers.com

