



Photo by Molly Schlachter

ASK THE PRO

developing marking

By Bill and Becky Eckett

This "Ask the Pro" is the third 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.

Teaching these factors is the foundation to encourage life long lessons built on success.

In this article, we will address the importance of Memory Marking. 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.

Developing "Memory Marking" is similar to developing "Marking the Area of a Fall" in that the dog has to make the decisions on finding the mark on his own and do so with confidence. It is the opposite of teaching the line to the mark or concept marking where he has to have discipline in order to complete the task correctly. Here, he has to remember where the gunner stood and the direction the mark was thrown. For this reason, it is critical to simplify early lessons so the dog gains confidence that he will make the correct choice and he will move with style and enthusiasm.

In developing memory marking the gunner will be your greatest asset. When the dog needs help, he should be the one to help him. You should try to stay away from any commands from the line or discipline from the whistle.

In developing memory marking, we are talking about cold memory marks versus developing memory marks. When we discuss marking concepts, these will include situations where memory marking will be taught. Concepts are initially taught through built marks with a known area of fall. Developing memory marking uses a memory bird in an area that is not known.

Prior to this point the dog has always been focused on the gunner. In its simplest form, introducing retired guns as singles makes the young dog develop and use his memory. The most important thing is success. Whether you salt the area, use wing clip birds, streamers on the birds, or have gunners help, there should be short cover and no obstacles. If breakdown occurs, use your thrower to help the dog; handling is not the objective. At this point, the dog may not even be handling yet. By handling, you are making decisions for the dog; this is where your gunner is important to either bring the dog out to the fall or back to the fall because you are trying to develop depth perception and memory.

We use simple retired guns; presented first as singles because the dog has to develop the ability to remember the area of the fall instead of having assistance from the gunner. Again, you build on success. In order to achieve success, you begin with shorter marks over clear, uncomplicated ground. In any form of training

as you advance a dog, you have to put the next step in its most simple form; no matter how successful he may have been in his previous work. Like in other training sequences, as the dog progresses we can take away the salting of the area, shackled birds, popper guns, etc. As he becomes more proficient, it would be fine to add obstacles – but in the simplest form and one at a time. For example, the line would be square to or through the obstacle to the mark.

Other factors to consider when teaching the retired gun would be limiting distance. Your dog may be capable of marking longer distances but whenever introducing a new lesson you have to put it in the simplest form. Single retired guns or memory birds should be thrown down wind. Use short cover and no obstacles or points of contention should be present. The only objective to the early lesson is remembering the fall. This is no different than teaching to hunt the area of the fall properly. If your young dog has trouble, ask the gunner to pop out, throw again and sit back down or stay out to gain success. Remember, at this point it is not about the line to the mark or developing a marking concept, it is about developing memory. If the young dog has difficulty, repeating the retired gun or memory bird would be self-defeating. Although we feel strongly about repeating at times, in this situation it would detract from the lesson of teaching memory.

Once a dog understands the mechanics of single retrieves, built doubles, and retired gun singles, we like to start teaching simple cold doubles to help develop memory.

It is very important to make the memory bird easy and obvious even though you have taught tighter built doubles. When we start teaching doubles we want the memory bird to be free of distraction. The young dog should be able to totally focus on the mark; again, distance is not a factor. Just as you taught the retired gun, do all you can to encourage the dog to remember the mark by using a popper gun on memory bird, streamers on bird, wing clip or shoot several times. It is important that the mark be worthy of the dog's focus.

For example, imagine yourself standing on a clock as the dog heels on the left. The gunner would be at 10 o'clock maybe at a distance of 40 yards throwing to 9 o'clock. The go bird would be at 2 o'clock thrown towards 3 o'clock at about 40 yards. Remember, distance is not factor at this time. You may have had the young dog on marks four times as far but at this point the lesson must be in the simplest form to develop the dog's confidence in memory marking.

Once the dog becomes more confident and

has experienced success at wide open doubles we gradually start tightening up marks and possibly lengthening the distance. Try to keep in balance that a memory bird is not always a long bird. Don't get caught up in the Derby format of always having the long bird as a memory bird.

Triples and/or quads would be taught using the same methods in that they are introduced in a very wide open and short format. Use the same principle we used in developing memory marking: gunners out and visible. As the dog becomes more proficient, the same lengthening and tightening principles would be used. Always stay mindful of balancing long memory birds and short memory birds. If you feel the dog is having trouble with lack of confidence or intelligent hunt on memory birds, simplify and try to position the memory bird in the place where a dog would be likely to go. Generate Success. ■

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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.