



Photo by Molly Schlachter

ASK THE PRO

developing marking

By Bill and Becky Eckett

This "Ask the Pro" is the fourth and final in a series of four articles focusing on Developing Marking written by Bill and Becky Eckett of Blackwater Retrievers in Centerview, Missouri.

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

At a meeting prior to the beginning of the 2010 National Amateur, Charlie Hays recognized the contributions of a long time field trialer, John McAssey. One of the things Charlie pointed out was John's effect on marking concepts while John was actively judging. At one time in field trials, the standard in marking tests was having the long-middle bird with another bird on each side at a shorter distance. As legend goes, it was John who developed the "McAssey Special" when he pulled in the middle mark to create what is now recognized as the indented triple. Although this was before my time, (but not Charlie's), Mr. McAssey may have recognized that dogs were being trained for that kind of marking concept. Trainers could train the dogs for the long bird down the middle concept through repetition and training. The trainers could elicit a conditioned response in patterning that popular marking concept. So, was their performance a true evaluation of their marking ability and memory, or of a conditioned/trained response? This could have been what Mr. McAssey recognized. From here, judges have continued to modify marking concepts and blind concepts affected by training, trends and favorite tests.

There are two schools of thought on developing marking concepts. Each of these has its opinion on the value of repeating versus not repeating. We believe that repeating can be beneficial at times. Both schools teach through repetition during obedience, force fetch, handling drills and simple hand thrown marks. Up to this point, the young dog has learned through repetition. If repetition was beneficial in the yard it could also be an asset when going to the field to teach beginning marking concepts. The value of repeating may be a consideration of the dog's age, its learning ability, the concept being taught, and the conditions of the area. Remember our focus is to generate a positive attitude as we develop our young dogs. At times in training it can be beneficial to repeat while teaching marking concepts. Up to this point, the dog has been presented information in a repetitive format. Teaching marking concepts should be no different. Repeating may not be beneficial if our dog does the concept.

Generally, beginning marking concepts are

taught as singles. As we have discussed in previous articles, everything is introduced in its simplest form. Our gunners would be relatively wide and short. As proficiency is established, the marks would become tighter and longer and in different sequences. What would be the last bird down for some people or the go bird for other people, would be the first single to run. Generally, the singles are taught in the order they would be picked up then put together as a concept. Benefit may be gained by repeating the test as a multiple to be certain the dog understands the marking concept. The idea of teaching marking concepts as singles first is that we are also working on gunner recognition, head swinging, helping to develop depth perception, and reinforcing hunting the area of a fall properly. And when we put the singles together to teach a marking concept to the young dog, he is looking out at known areas with confidence. We are building on his successes.

Some might think it more advantageous to repeat the marking concept with a different set of marks. We believe there can be more of a benefit repeating the test to maintain the integrity of the marking concept during this stage of the young dog's training. It can be difficult if not impossible to recreate the grounds and obstacles that were part of the original test to evaluate whether the dog has mastery of the concept.

Once the dog understands built marking concepts, we can begin teaching cold marking concepts. Remember, we are working with a dog that can handle at this point. Even though you may have accomplished difficult built marking concepts, you are now moving to another level so remember to make your early setups relatively wide open and short. If the dog chooses the wrong gun, we can correct through handling to the proper gun station. When you introduce cold marking concepts, your objective is to teach memory and the discipline of going to the gunner in the order the dog is directed. At this point it is not necessarily in the best interest to repeat. Remember your objective. Repeating at this point would negate teaching memory with regards to the marking concept. It may be advantageous to go elsewhere and set up the concept to identify whether you have mastery of that concept.

Remember, minor stakes tend to follow a little more standardized format of marking concepts. Major stakes will involve more deviation. From the long-bird down the middle to the McAssey Special, to quads, to single and double retired guns, to short memory, long memory, to wipe out birds, and interrupted marks and everything in between, our game will continually be evolving as dogs become more skilled. But it will always involve modifications of a basic

format that include the topics covered in this series. Always keep in mind that whenever we are teaching our retrievers about any aspect of the game, whether its teaching marking skills or handling skills, a good solid training program will consist of and should strive for: Focus, Attitude, Balance, Trust, and Consistency. ■

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.