



Photo by Molly Schlachter

## ASK THE PRO

### poison bird drill

By Rob Erhardt

POISON BIRD BLINDS are commonplace in the All-Age stakes of today's field trials. To achieve success at this highest level, a handler and their dog must become proficient at leaving a thrown bird and running a blind past it.

Poison bird blinds can be in one of three locations: in front of the bird, under the arc and behind the gun. Some of these blinds may be located very tight to the fall of the bird, while others can be located a greater distance away. Wind plays an important factor in the running of poison bird blinds and running a blind downwind of the poison bird can have serious consequences to a dog that is not skilled in this task.

Before I get into the details on my favorite poison bird drill, I want to discuss the importance of consistency on the line by the dog/handler team. It is crucial that every handler has a method on the line in how they run poison bird blinds and that the dog understands this method. Too often, I see a handler send a dog with "back" on one of these blinds when the dog clearly has a mark on his mind. Not every trainer's method is similar, but it cannot

be stressed enough that having a method is important in the running of these blinds and that the dog must understand this method to get him in a blind frame of mind. With practice of the method on a drill such as this one, a dog will clearly understand that the bird thrown is not to be picked up.

I will describe the method I use. When the bird is thrown and the judge gives me my number, I will put my hand down over the dog's head as if to send him. I then say "no", pull my hand away and move the dog into the position I desire for that particular blind. By doing this each and every time I run a poison bird blind with my dogs, at both trials and in training, they begin to understand exactly what this means and are much more compliant on line when asked to pull off the poison bird.

#### The Drill

This drill can either be set up in a new location each time, or as a pattern for you and your dog. Depending on the terrain, I like to put a gun out in a neutral position at about 100-125

yards. The two long blinds should be tight to the gun and at least 75 yards past the gun. The third blind is two paces directly in front of the gun.

Be very cognizant of the direction of the wind when running this drill. It should be run crosswind in an ideal situation, to give the dog every opportunity to smell the poison bird, but can also be run downwind, especially with a younger dog.

The location of the three blinds are very specific in that I want to teach my dogs to feel comfortable running at and tight to guns. There are times in field trials when a poison bird is not thrown, but the blind requires the dog to be very tight to a gun in the field. This drill will not only work on poison birds, but also on your dog's understanding on the method we use in his recognition that it is a poison bird blind and also improves a dog's comfort level in running tight to guns.

#### Variations of the Drill DERBY

I like to start this drill when dogs are of Derby age, however I leave out the blind at the

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gunner's feet at this time. I will start these young dogs by having the gun do nothing but sit in the chair while I run the two blinds.

At this point, early in their training on blinds, dogs may not understand running blinds tight to a gun and it is up to us to coach and teach. I am very careful not to apply pressure to a dog, at any age, near or around a gun in the field. With the level of precision required to run tight to guns in their careers, I don't want to create flaring off a gun in a dog.

The parameters of the corridor are wider for a young dog than an older dog and I am looking for confidence and momentum, and not the fine line, at this point in their lives.

When a dog becomes comfortable running the blinds tight to the gun, I will add the thrown bird as a mark. I will have the bird thrown, have the dog pick it up, and then run the blinds on both sides of the gun. This lays the foundation to run a blind under an arc or downwind of bird scent.

## QUALIFYING

I add the blind at the gunner's feet when the dog is training at the Qualifying level and I will now take the opportunity to teach this third blind. It can be taught simply enough as a walk out blind, or having the dog watch the gunner plant the blind. Again I use attrition, and no collar pressure, especially around the gun.

I like to pick up this short blind first when running the drill. This will get the dog in the frame of mind to run close to the gun and occasionally, at field trials, we are seeing short blinds planted in this manner.

When a dog is proficiently picking up the mark and running a blind past it, I will introduce the poison bird. To start, I have the poison bird thrown on the opposite side that the blind will be run. For example, I will throw the poison bird to the handler's right and run the blind on the left.

It is again worth mentioning that I put my hand down over the dog's head, say "no" and pull or push the dog over to the blind each and every time I run a poison bird blind.

## ALL-AGE

Now that your dog is proficient at the concept of poison birds, it is now time to start running under the arc poison bird blinds. In setting this drill up, it is generally my goal to have the All-Age dog wind at least one of the poison birds thrown when running a blind past it. I start with running the short blind at the gunner's feet first. On this drill, a poison bird can be thrown in either direction, making both blinds under the arc.

## TROUBLE SHOOTING

### *Dog flares off gun*

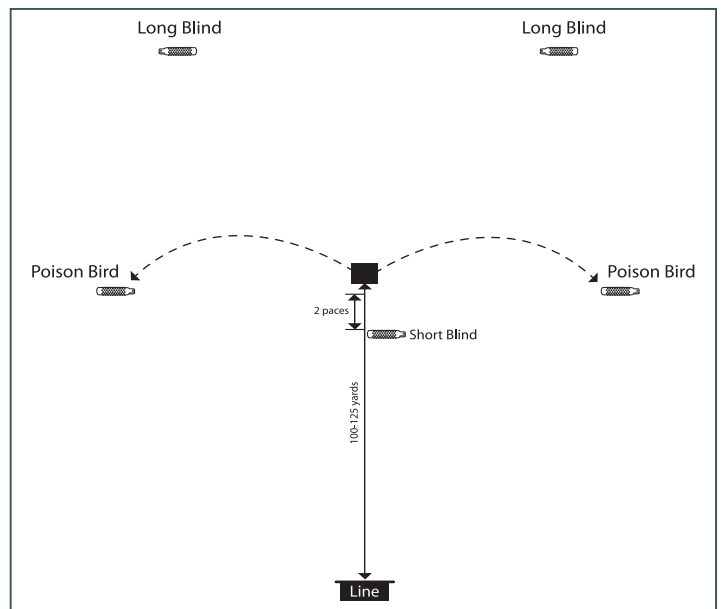
If the dog shows a "gun phobia" and is really flaring badly off of the white coat on the short blind, it does not hurt to recall the dog and start over. At this point I will have the gun stand, wave his arms and sit back down. I would even consider having the gun pick up and drop the bird at the short blind. Hopefully we have been careful in not correcting a dog near a gun in one of the earlier attempts at this drill, so as not to create this problem.

### *Dog tries to pick up the poison bird*

As mentioned before, I will use attrition and handling to work a dog under the arc but if a dog is blatantly refusing my casts and trying to pick up the poison bird, then I will use a collar correction here. Hopefully with one reminder that the poison bird is not the picked up, the dog will take the next cast and carry on his way. Indirect pressure is the most appropriate form here, however direct pressure may be resorted to if the dog is refusing the sit whistle.

### *Dog picks up the poison bird*

When this happens, I will have the dog sit with the bird in his mouth and walk out to him. I will then take the bird and place it away from the



dog and continue running the blind from that location. At that point, I would return to the line and repeat the same poison bird blind.

### *Dog won't go under the arc*

This dog may be flaring from both the gun, the bird or both. Applying pressure at this point will become a self-fulfilling prophecy for the dog, so I will use attrition. Attrition could include multiple casts and even some partial recalls of the dog. This is where I will again say that it is important to teach the blind at the gunner's feet first so that a dog becomes comfortable running near the gun.

### *To pick up the mark or not?*

It is my general rule that I pick up the bird as a mark after the dog has successfully completed the blind. Of course if it were difficult to get the dog off of the poison bird, then I would leave that mark for another day when the dog was more compliant in running the blind.

In summary, this drill has become important in my program as it not only teaches dogs how to run poison bird blinds, but I can also teach the method on line I will use at a field trial so that they click in to what it is I am asking of them. With practice, your dog should easily ascertain that it is a poison bird blind you are running and he should feel comfortable running tight to the gun and the bird while not picking it up.

*\*Many dogs in the course of this training may flare the line to the back pile. You may whistle, sit and handle with collar force. Personally, a quicker and more lasting fix for me is to do a mixture of remote sends (back casts from the line) and forcing en route to pile, instead of many forcings from your side. ■*

## Silvertip Retrievers

### Rob Erhardt

Rob Erhardt started Silvertip Retrievers in 2008 after working for Frank Baird and Mike Cicero of Mad River Kennels and Karl Gunzer of High Spirit Retrievers. Rob spends the summer months in Ronan, MT and the winter in Bonham, TX. Rob had 3 dogs qualified for the National in 2012 and trains dogs from Basics to All-Age. [www.silvertipretrievers.com](http://www.silvertipretrievers.com)

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