

ASK THE PRO

marking vs lining

By Don Remien

HAVE YOU EVER asked yourself what the definition of a mark is? Some who train and judge think it's the straightest line from the mat to the bird. Even those who don't believe that way often judge by a "straightest line" standard.

So what is a true marking dog? Is it the ability of a dog to run straight? Or is it the ability of a dog to find a fallen bird in a quick and skillful manner?

Over the years, as our sport has advanced, true marking has lost its meaning. Too many trials are judged by the line to the bird and not by the dog's ability to truly mark! The sport itself has demanded these changes in order to separate the quality dogs that we have in today's game ... or should that be "the quality of trainers and handlers?"

Today's marks are longer, tighter and more contrary to the dog's natural instincts and inherited skills. The use of factors such as wind, terrain, water, cover and distance, are more and more extreme. Many judges no longer strive to test the dogs; they strive to find ways to cause the dogs to fail. Field trials, long ago, lost sight of the "hunting situation." It has become a game in itself. **BUT IT IS THE GAME WE PLAY!**

Frankly, I enjoy playing our game with its extreme challenges, but, most of all, I love watching, training, and trying to understand dogs! I can train a collie to line and to handle. But I can't train him to naturally find a bird, on his own, at distances from 40 yards to 440 yards through water, cover, scent, varied terrain, wind and other marks! Those skills are remarkable in some retrievers.

So is it the line or is it the destination? Is the better marking dog the dog that goes where he's told or the dog that knows where he's going? If you're competitive in All-Age stakes the answer is BOTH! Dogs must be taught to fight the factors that judges put in the way to "deviate" the dog from its line to the mark! We must have a dog that goes straight and, "does not disturb game," yet is capable of thinking on his own while on the quest to the bird. The dog needs to know not only where he's go-

ing but know where he has been and where he shouldn't be! He should use his "BRAIN ALONG WITH TRAINING." Quality field trial dogs need to be able to think. They must be able to make free and conscious choices. It is easy for an animal to get into difficulty, it is much more difficult for it to think his way out of trouble! The ability to solve problems is the strongest trait that a dog can have.

Over the years I've had the privilege to work with some very brilliant dogs. I've also had the privilege to work with some less brilliant, yet capable, "trained dogs" that were "one toke over the line" but had hearts and desires the size of Texas. They were Maseratis with computers built by Mattel.

In writing this article my desire is two fold.

First, I hope to encourage you, particularly minor stake judges, to appreciate a mark and not just a line. I hope you will reward those

Reprinted by Permission of Retriever News

young dogs for their natural ability and not just because they are trained to angle across the corner of the field and into the water. A hooked bird should not decide a field trial. Young dogs and new handlers are the future and hope for the sport. We should appreciate where they are in their development. In minor stakes, more often than we should, dogs are rewarded for training rather than their natural abilities.

Second, I present a diagram and describe a drill that will help the NATURAL MARKING ability of your dog by teaching him to think on his own, make choices and decisions, focus, separate verbal cues, and to not rely on you to do all his thinking!

This drill has no name, call it what you want. I have found that there are always several names for the same drill with multiple trainers taking credit for its invention.

This drill can be done with young or old dogs simply by varying the difficulty based on age and experience. Before beginning the drill, the dogs must be able to handle.

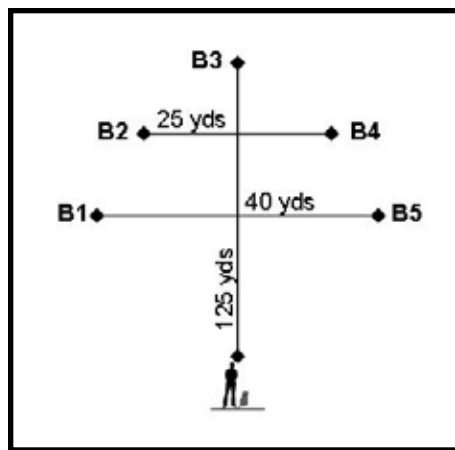
THE DRILL:

In a small pattern field that the dog is familiar with, (I use my double T pattern) put multiple visible white bumpers on all of your blinds. Put one gunner, two as you advance the drill, somewhere in the pattern field short of your blinds (see diagram).

Now run a blind. I use a “dead bird” queue for blinds and a “mark” queue for marks.

Next throw a mark against the blind, i.e., towards the blind using an orange bumper for advanced dogs, white for beginners. Treat it like a poison bird (pull-off) and do another blind.

As the dog returns, face the mark, and without moving, lining, or no motion at all, even on the delivery, queue it, “mark,” and see where he looks. Is he going to look at the visible blind he has already retrieved? Will he look at other blinds? Perhaps he will look straight up in the air!



Remember these are known blinds, lying in plain sight.

What we are expecting is for the dog to align himself (initially, often just the head) and look at the mark while ignoring the bumpers at the blinds. The key is for us to remain still and not attempt to realign the dog's spine or point him in the direction of the mark. The dog does the thinking and lining! Put your hands in your pockets, anchor your feet, tell him to mark, and then see what he does. If he's sitting cockeyed, that's okay. Watch his head and keep saying “mark” until he looks in the proper direction. Send him and see where he goes. If he goes toward a blind DO NOT CORRECT WITH THE COLLAR! Get him to the mark in another way. Usually I help in one of three ways: by calmly calling him in and repeating the whole thing, having the gunner hup or help, or by handling him to the bumper without a correction!

Repeat if you want. Next, run another blind, then throw a mark against it and repeat the same procedure remembering to anchor yourself and not point the dog! From this point forward, use your imagination and skills to advance the drill. You can flowerpot single marks off of the same gun station, use multiple gunners or gun stations and the like. I seldom

do multiple marks with this particular drill.

Separate your commands of dead bird and mark. Let the dog talk to you. By watching his ears and body language you will be told where he is looking and what he is thinking. If the dog doesn't already understand and separate the two different verbal commands “dead bird” and “mark” through repetition, he will shortly.

It is interesting to coach my clients through this drill. Perhaps they are more trained than their dogs because they often find themselves POINTING their dog. Some dogs beg to be lined. They don't know what to do without help. I have had field champions act like idiots until they understand that it's ok to think on their own.

This is a fun and simple drill. It doesn't take a large area or a lot of people. It will also tend to tighten the dogs hunt area. Remember THIS IS A DRILL. In competition we help our dogs. We point, or do whatever is necessary to win.

In closing, I have a question. If you have a row of cars, a fence, or something that blocks the way to the mark, which dog, (a true marking dog or the lining dog) will find the bird? My gun dog and backseat companion DFR can (and does) run around any pond, any fence, and almost anything else to pin any field trial mark. Is he a marking dog?

“Blessed be the dogs that know where they are going.”

Good luck! Work on teaching and coaching and be careful about commanding and demanding! ■

Rising Sun Retrievers Don Remien

In 1980, Don Remien turned his passion into his profession. Out of his first 10 dogs 7 became field champions and one became a National Amateur Champion! Since that time Don has been associated with over 80 field champions, several with over 100 All-Age points. He has coached his clients to three National Amateur wins and 37 National finishes. Don is as well known for schooling handlers and trainers as he is for training dogs.