



Photo by Molly Schlachter



ASK THE PRO

poison bird training

By Paul Sletten

TRAINING A DOG that is comfortable and compliant dealing with poison birds can be a truly challenging task. It also is a great asset in today's world of field trials and hunt tests. Some poison birds often seem too extreme for a dog to understand while running the line to a blind just a few feet downwind.

Some handlers feel a poison bird is an unfair test. I will leave that subject for you to decide. But rest assured, if you compete in a handful of events per year, you will see this test!

Having your dog perform well on a poison bird blind is a long process. It takes patience and a teaching attitude on the part of the trainer. It takes knowledge and compliance on the part of the dog. This is very important. For the sake of this article, I will assume that you are going to be patient with your dog. I also assume that you are going to be a teacher. You are the one that is going to "enlighten" your dog on the correct behavior while showing poise and confidence. Not panic episodes, with harsh correcting.

The first thing to remember is that poi-

son bird blinds take a dog months and years to perform in a polished fashion. And even when they understand what is being asked, balanced training will be the key to them continuing their trained behavior.

Everything we train a dog to do comes with actions and reactions. Training heavy on long retired guns will disrupt a dog's marking on short birds. Making corrections for line manners can interfere with their marking. Forcing on blinds or stressing momentum can discourage direction change on their casting. Doing too many poison birds, or too many blinds near a bird can hinder short bird marking and marking and retrieving the poison bird! So remember it is important to keep your training tests balanced. I'm only in favor of repeating a concept multiple times, "pounding it into their head" when I have a few weeks until my next event. That way I can teach and repeat the concept and still have time to bring the dog back into balance when it counts. Therefore, please analyze your schedule and train accordingly. If the

dog is not yet competing, then this is less of a concern.

I usually do not introduce a dog to poison birds until they are smoothly running some land and water blinds. If your dog is running pattern blinds with confidence, that can be a good place to start. Obviously you want to throw the poison bird well off to the side, at least 90 degrees. That way you can clearly reheel and identify a different line to take on the blind. Whatever cues you use, be it reheeling or "dead bird," is not as important as it is to be consistent with them.

It is always important at any age to do lots of blinds without poison birds. We need to constantly evaluate the dog's responses on "straightforward" blinds. If we are having other issues, like being uncooperative on water entries or not casting well, that is not the time to add a poison bird. In general, I like to do my poison birds on blinds that would otherwise not give the dog much trouble. Whatever is appropriate for that age is fine! Maybe it is a simple water channel blind for

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a two year old dog or a downwind featureless field for an 8-year-old! Don't add too many challenges at a time!

When your dog has progressed enough, quite possibly three to four years old, I like to do a "poison bird drill" every couple weeks. I like to go to a featureless field with very little cover and put out three to four land blinds. I have a gunner shoot and throw a mark about 40-60 yards from the handler's position. The bird is sometimes completely visible to the dog from the line! They know it is right there! I then proceed to run my land blinds (at least three times as far as the gunner) in any order I choose based on what feels best for that dog. One under the arc. One outside the arc. One behind the gunner. And maybe one off to the side.

This brings up two other important mes-

sages about training for poison birds.

First, I am a strong believer in the dog being sent to pickup the poison bird at some point during the test. I do this at least 90 percent of the time. I feel this enhances the dogs marking ability and encourages them to be cooperative and know they will always get it eventually. Just not until I say! We want to create comfort, not avoidance!

The second message is that if and when you are going to train on poison birds in close proximity to the gunner, remember this. Your dog must first be smooth and competent about handling by the gun without a poison bird thrown!

Remember, do not over do it. Sometimes working on a poison bird once or twice a week and staying balanced with your dog's progres-

sion, will be better than cramming it in multiple times in a week. This level of training will take several months to learn and truly understand. And remember to always do plenty of poison birds that are not a big influence on the blind, however far off to the side that might be. Don't feel like the dog needs the ultimate challenge every time you do one.

Hopefully this will help your dog become confident and cooperative! Good luck! ■

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