



ASK THE PRO

an alternative to pattern blinds

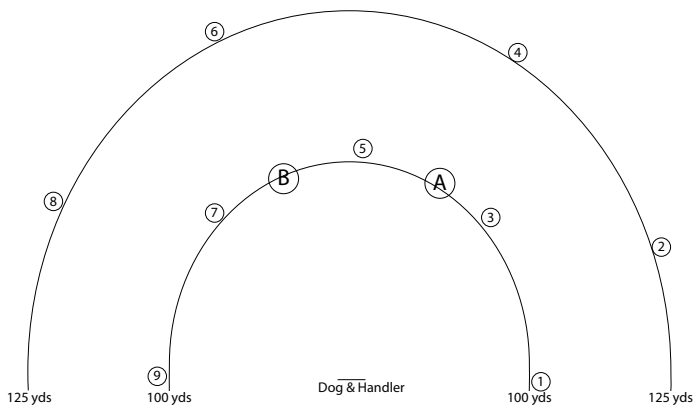
By Rody Best

I'M ALWAYS LOOKING FOR new and more effective methods for teaching retrievers how to handle better on blind retrieves in the field. A couple of years ago, I discovered a drill termed "9 Point." I have read a lot of books and been to many seminars, but I had never heard of this drill before. This drill is an alternative for pattern blinds. At the time, I wasn't completely convinced that 9 Point was going to compliment my training program, but I decided that I would set it up as soon as I got home and start running some dogs through it anyways. Ultimately, this turned out to be a very good decision!

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Let me first outline the 9 Point drill and then I will go over its benefits. First, you will need a relatively flat and featureless field where you can run blinds out to at least 150-175 yards. You will need 9 blind stakes or flags. You will also need at least 5 large white bumpers and 4 large orange bumpers. Ground cover needs to be low, ankle to shin high is acceptable. You need to set up the drill with your back to the predominant wind direction (for example, we usually have a south wind in Texas, so I set up my 9 Point drill facing north.)

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Before we begin, your dog must have already completed the simple *T-drill* – i.e., your dog must be able to sit on a whistle and take a cast reliably (we prefer to have also completed swim-by, but this is not mandatory.) Begin this drill by ‘identifying’ the location of the front 5 blinds (white bumpers, #’s 1, 3, 5, 7 and 9) for the dog. We use a bird boy and get the dog’s attention by either shooting or yelling “hey-hey-hey-hey” and throwing the white bumper to the first stake. Send your dog to the bumper on its name (this is a mark, not a blind.) Receive your dog and now send your dog back to #1 on a blind retrieve. Repeat the same process for #’s 3, 5, 7, and 9. We usually do this for a couple of days until we feel confident the dog has a general understanding of the location of these five blinds.

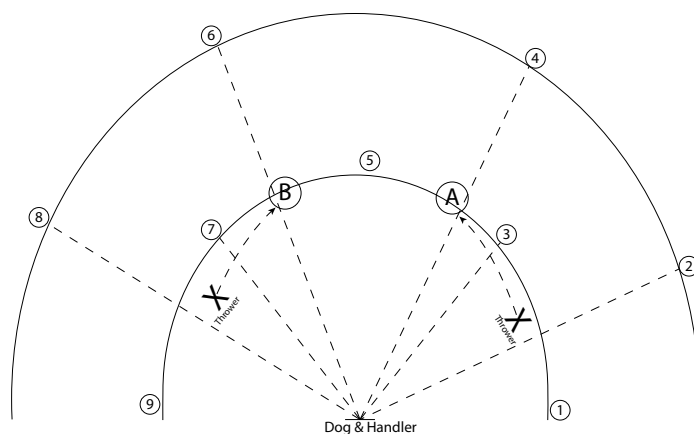
The next session, we begin running the five blinds “cold,” meaning we run the blinds without identifying them first. This process can take up to a week, sometimes two – depending on the trainability of the dog. The ultimate goal would be to have the dog lining or completing the blinds in one to two whistles before your dog is ready to move forward.

Now it is time to introduce the orange bumpers (#’s 2, 4, 6, and 8.) Follow the same procedure that you did for the white bumper – identify as a mark first, and then repeat as a blind. If your dog is having difficulty, you can move up and run from the arc of the white bumpers first, then back up and repeat. After a couple sessions of identifying the location of the orange bumpers, you can begin running them “cold.” It is important to note here that this is NOT a lining drill; in the beginning, do not spend a great deal of time concerned with the initial line your dog takes. In fact, this is the point of this drill – most of the time your dog will take an initial line towards one of the white bumpers. This will allow you the opportunity to cast your dog away from the suction of the white bumpers and towards the orange bumpers. It is very common to have difficulty handling to the orange bumpers because your dog will have to go between two white bumpers – #4 and #6 seem to really give our dogs a difficult time. Run your dog on the orange bumpers until your dog is lining them or completing them in one to two whistles.

The next step is to start running all 9 blinds in order, from 1 through 9. If you encounter trouble on a certain blind, scoot up and work through the issue. If you have a particularly difficult time on a blind and your dog becomes tired, you may not be able to complete all 9 blinds in one session – that’s ok. In fact, during the hot summer months in Texas, we usually reduce the number of blinds and only run #’s 2 through 8 (skip #1 and #9.) Towards the end of the drill, I begin to pay attention to lining; the white ones are generally pretty easy to line, the orange ones can be a challenge. As a general rule, I recall the dog

if they try to go back to a blind they just completed (just be cautious or you can create popping and/or no-go issues.) I want to see effort by the dog to go in a new direction; not back to an old fall. Generally, depending on the caliber of the dog, this can take 8 to 10 sessions at least to fully complete.

The last step is to add marks to the drill (see diagram.) Have a gunner throw a bird to location A, and send your dog to retrieve the bird. Next, run blinds 2, 3, and 4. I call this opposite side marks. Usually the gunner is a good distraction and will allow you to work on pulling your dog off and lining them up on the blinds. Repeat the same procedure on the other side. Gunner throws to B, and then run blinds 6, 7, and 8. Once your dog is sufficiently running the blinds with the presence of the gunner in the field, it is time to do same side marks. This is effectively the same procedure, except the Gunner and the blinds are run on the same side of the field. It is important to note that these blinds have a relational concept to the gunner – #2 is behind the gun, #3 is under the arc of the mark and #4 is through the old fall of the mark. This will teach your dog to be able to recognize and be successful running blinds that are influenced by a gunner’s station. After completing this last step, you have essentially completed the *9 Point* drill.



The *9 Point* drill is an effective way to help transition your dog from the drill field to running cold blinds. However, its applications are actually endless. I have been known to use the drill as a simple tune-up for my advanced dogs, increase confidence in a young dog, improve momentum, work on popping or no-go issues, scalloping, digging back or even teaching poisoned bird blinds. I hope you will discover its usefulness as we have and implement it into your training programs. ■

Best Retrievers Rody and Kristin Best

Rody Best has been training retrievers professional for nearly 20 years. He has competed in both AKC Hunt Tests and Field Trials, HRC Hunt Tests and the Super Retriever Series. Located in Paige, Texas, Best Retrievers also trains gundogs for dove and waterfowl hunting.

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