



ASK THE PRO

ten tips to help you win

By Sandie Bond

IN PLAYING THIS GAME with our retrievers, you will hear many sayings from people. The one saying that I heard when I first started with my Labrador “Guinness” was ... “a trial can be won or lost on the line.” *Here are ten tips to help you win.*

1) Obedience

Obedience is the first step we teach our dogs in any venue that we venture into. It is the basis of our foundation of retriever training. Having an obedient dog helps in many ways. Dogs learn to focus better on marks and listen better on blinds. It will help with dogs that tend to creep or break.

Everyone loves to see the desire, enthusiasm in the dogs, but the dog needs to be obedient and under control.

2) Let the Dog Scan the Field

When you and your dog come to line, whether in trialing or training, Hunt test or Field Trial, let your dog scan the field. They need to read the terrain and get a look at the layout of the land or pond. Let them look at the landmarks and factors of the field as well as any gun stations (where applicable).

3) Communication

Try to limit your conversations on line to cue words only. “Watch/mark”, “there/good/line”, “here/heel”, “deadbird” etc. Dogs may have forgotten a mark and communicating to them that they are looking in the right direction builds confidence in the dog with the handler. They will begin to believe in you when you are consistent with this.

Try to use your voice/whistle intonations as well. Use a louder send to help drive a dog through an old fall or a long (retired) mark. Soft voice for a short retired or easy bird.

Whistles can also be used in the same manner. When the dog is close, use a soft short toot to help relax them. Using a hard quick toot after a cast refusal can send a message that you’re angry. Save the long loud toots for when your dog is at a distance.

4) Concrete Feet

Many times you will watch a handler and their dog dance and move all over at the line. If you keep your feet still and have the dog move to you this will eliminate a lot of annoying and unnecessary movement from your dog.

As your dog comes in from picking up a bird, you should already have your feet planted and facing the next bird to be picked up. Your dog should come in to heel position at the side you’ve communicated. This will help to minimize movement by the dog. Try to have the dog heel at your side where his/her nose is even with your toes.

5) Lining Your Dog

Lining your dog up to a blind can be tough and sometimes intimidating. Instead of lin-

ing to the blind that is “x” yards away, draw an imaginary line from the blind and stop about 10 feet in front of you. Mark that spot and line your dog up to that spot rather than the blind.

6) Spinal Alignment

Spinal alignment is the key to a good initial line. From the beginning, we set up our dogs to go straight. We start this from puppy marks, force to the pile and T work. Have the dog’s spine straight and the dog will generally go in the same direction as it’s spine.

7) Watch the Dog

A lot of handlers get caught up in watching the birds during training or at a test/trial. Unless the bird is a flyer, you should be watching your dog. Flyers can be unpredictable. You need to glance up to see the fall of the flyer. Watching the dog makes sure the dog has seen the mark(s). You will know if your dog swung to another gun station or another area of the field/pond. Thrown dead birds will land in the same general area. As a handler, you need to know where they land.

8) Whistle in Mouth

When you send your dog on a blind, always have your whistle in your mouth. If not in your mouth, at the very least, it should be in your hand which is close to your mouth. If you need a quick whistle, you may stumble trying to get the whistle in your mouth. It can get caught up in clothing or other lanyards or just cause you to fumble. This can cause you to lose valuable seconds and allow your dog to be further away from the line to the blind. You could miss an opportunity to get them thru cover or into water.

9) Wind Direction

Knowing which way the wind is blowing is another advantage for the handler to use. Is the wind swirling, are dogs winding it before or after they get to bird, or is there no effect on the dogs?

Knowing the wind direction can help you put the dog downwind at the end of the blind, or determine whether to handle or not to handle on a mark.

10) Fast vs. Slow

Try not to get caught up in your dog’s tempo. If you have a fast dog, you as a handler must be slow. If your dog is forging ahead of you, walk slower. If your dog is lagging behind you, speed up.

The same is true for casting. Make sure your dog has sat and has found you before you (slowly) cast. Slow dog, fast handler, fast dog, slow handler.

In conclusion, if you apply each step into your online routine starting with obedience, your dogs performance will show signs of improvement. Hoping these tips will help you be successful in your future endeavors. ■

Dovetail Kennels

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“Ask the Pro” is written by a member of the Professional Retriever Trainers Association.
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