

The Art of Bird Placement

PART IV

A Continuing Conversation of Contributing Writers including Pat Burns, Jerry Patopea, Carl Boteze, Duncan Christie, Jerry Kamphuis and Judy Rasmuson

Presenting the next installment of *The Art of Bird Placement*, a continuation of the exchange between Pat Burns and Jerry Patopea with additional comments from amateurs active in the sport. We expect you will have reactions and insights to this next discussion and invite you to share them with us by writing us at: info@theretrievernews.com

I WOULD LIKE TO welcome Jerry Patopea back to our ongoing conversation about bird placement. At the end of our last discussion Jerry you said that you were disappointed that our talk had ended. And that you were just getting started. Well let's get started.

Jerry you make a strong case against the use of wingers for launching pheasant flyers. I have brought that topic up for discussion in some of my recent training groups. There is no shortage of opinions on this matter. I would like to share some of them with you.

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Carl Boteze:

Thank you Pat for bringing flyer throwing up for discussion and allowing me to contribute. As a bit of a purist, I feel a hand-thrown bird more closely simulates the flush of a pheasant or duck. The wing action of the flyer and the motion of the thrower make the mark more exciting and easier for the dogs to see.

A winger bird is often launched so fast and shot so quickly that it is hard for the dogs to see and to recognize as a flyer. A good thrower can make adjustments for such variables as wind, sun, hen versus a drake, suction of the bird to water or hedgerows, thus making the flight of the birds more consistent and the number of “no birds” and unfair falls less frequent.

As many clubs are now using bird boys supplied by local pros, maybe pros could include hand thrown fly-

ers in training thus helping the clubs by increasing the number of qualified throwers/gunners.

Duncan Christie:

As you know, both Snowbird and Tallokas use tossers in their trials and our winter group uses them regularly in training. I believe many other groups; both amateur and professional also use them regularly. Based on our experience, I think that the lighting and background are much more important to the visibility of the birds than the speed of the launch. Judges who take care to set up so that the birds are visible, benefit from greater consistency for the throw and fewer no birds, if they have decent guns.

When I started in trials, the entries were smaller, almost all help were volunteers who also ran dogs and we rotated in shifts so that you usually threw or shot for 20 to 25 dogs. Now, with paid help and many gunners who don't run dogs, almost everyone works all day for 60+ dogs. I think asking someone to throw 60+ pheasant flyers in a day leads to a less fair trial overall, than using a tosser.

At the Nationals, guns and throwers rotate every 25 dogs or so and both guns and throwers are very experienced. If you have this level of skills, hand thrown birds are probably preferable and I'm not advocating using tossers at Nationals.

Jerry Kamphuis:

These are my thoughts on the use of wingers for launching birds vs hand throwing birds at field trials. In the trials I go to in the Midwest, I see wingers

and hand thrown birds. I've seen good and bad flyers with either. The skill level of the gunners and the person loading the winger or throwing the flyer is often the difference in the quality of the flyer.

The bird placement of the flyer should be friendly. Taking into consideration the wind, lighting, background and plenty of room for the gunners to shoot. From a judging point of view I would prefer the hand thrown flyer. If I have quality throwers and gunners. I think the hand thrown flyer is more animated than one that comes out of a winger.

Judy Rasmuson:

I totally concur with Duncan on using tossers for all live birds as well as hen pheasants. It certainly hasn't been our experience that the tosser makes the bird invisible. If the bird is too far out to see then the same problem occurs whether hand thrown or mechanically tossed. Yes a human can adjust his throw to the wind shifts but in the years that we have used tossers at trials and in training this has not proved to be much of a problem. I would venture that there are far more no birds at the trials that I attend that use human arms to throw the flyer. Where we have no birds at Women's/Snowbird/Tallokas trials is when judges put pheasant flyers in inappropriate places...spots that don't take into account the varied fall of pheasants.

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Pat Burns:

Jerry, would you like to comment?

Jerry Patopea:

Well, yes I would.

In the West we don't see very many birds come out of wingers any more, dead or alive. We went through a period where we were seeing them frequently, but that appears to be in the past. All stations are hand-thrown, no matter the number of dogs, and the throws are not any different at five in the afternoon than eight in the morning. You take the birds as the thrower makes it, no matter his size or strength.

Today in training I had one thrower who threw over 100 pheasants and he may do the same tomorrow and the day after with no problem, so the number of throws is really irrelevant. The flyer throwers out here are often times the bird stewards throwing all day all weekend week after week. They often shoot too. How can you have more fun than that? Western tough I guess.

Out here, people don't like winger birds, because there is no thrower. There is nothing to cue the dog which way the bird is going, or when. If he turns from one station to the next and the bird is released a little early he may not see it or have any cue which way to look. This is a real problem with the long station being thrown second or third or being in an inconspicuous position. We want the dog to be able to mark a bird he sees thrown, not guess where the bird may have gone.

There is so much more to judge a dog on than if he guessed the proper side of the gun or the distance of the throw. If the dog sees the bird then he can be judged more fairly on important things like marking, penetrating cover, going through water, disturbing as little unnecessary ground as possible, and exhibiting confidence in his ability to bring home a marked bird.

Pat Burns:

I told you that there was no shortage of opinions on this matter. One thing I think we can all agree upon is that the importance of the visibility of the marks. The beauty of a well placed bird is one that the dog sees well, but has a difficult time finding. And the skills required in digging out a difficult mark are the ones we as trainers/judges are interested in rewarding. Courage, perseverance and sagacity are all traits that a well placed bird rewards.

This transitions well into our next topic. Jerry, you spoke of an interest in discussing the line to marks. Your comments were directing attention to commanding commit-

ment and dedication to perseverance. Would you like to expand on that? What kind of bird placement might reward these kinds of traits? Is this something you judge or does the test takes care of that?

Jerry Patopea:

A field trial judge not only finds a winner today but continues to develop the heredity of retrievers. Every winner is more likely to be bred and pass on their genes than a non winner, so every judge is developing the dog of the future.

I have seen dogs run around an entire lake and win because they bumped the bird at the end, or bail out of a pond and run down the bank to the bird, or run around a large thicket of cover and arc to the bird and be rewarded for that behavior because they bumped the bird at the end of that arc. I don't think we are doing retrievers any favor by placing these dogs evenly with dogs that courageously fight the conditions to get to the bird.

The Use of Wingers in BIRD PLACEMENT

- Optimal if used at a distance under 200 yards
- The angle of throw should be fairly flat and elevated to assure visibility
- A throwing motion can easily simulated by station guns before the launch to assure visibility of the launch
- Use of new elastic cords will assure a great throw

Judges are developing retrievers with every test they set and every ribbon they deliver. I wonder why a judge would ever score only part of a retrieve, and not the entire retrieve. They certainly are not developing the best dog if their scorecard doesn't start until the dog gets to the area of the fall. They have missed some of the greatest part of a retriever in their ability to persevere their route through tough terrain.

It's a lot easier for a dog to run around all the terrain and stay high and dry than to dive into heavy cover or cold water and maintain focus and persevere, and the more dogs are

rewarded for running around, the harder it gets to have a dog who will persevere because the ones who run around and win will be the ones getting bred.

Pat Burns:

What a great response! You are so right about the responsibility we all have to the future of our retriever breeds. I believe the test should take care of this. I don't believe we should judge on our training standards. A well designed test should reward courage and perseverance. A well thought out test should make it very difficult to find a bird when a dog isn't willing to attack the challenges they are faced with. Finding a balance between a natural and a well trained dog is the challenge for both trainer and judge. I strongly believe that we don't want to make mechanical robots in the pursuit of a finely trained retriever. An animal that is disciplined enough to go straight and relaxed enough to be a free thinker should be all our goals. Therein lies "The Art of Bird Placement."

Jerry Patopea:

I might add just one more thing. A dog does not necessarily have to be trained to go straight. It is inherently bred into each dog to puncture the terrain or fade with the elements. We as trainers develop the dog we have. Some dogs naturally challenge the terrain no matter how imposing. Those are the dogs we are really looking for.

Pat Burns:

Jerry, your passion for this sport and these dogs is apparent. You always add an interesting perspective on things. Thank you for your lively discussion. And thank you for taking the time to talk about the art of bird placement. I would also like to thank Judy, Duncan and Carl for sharing their opinions. And thank you for taking the time to join us in our ongoing discussion. Until next time..... ■

Pat Burns

Join Pat in this continuing journey! He is currently offering a variety of services. They include personalized coaching sessions, boot camps, workshops and customized training experiences. If you have any interest, you can check Pat's website www.patburnsretrievertraining.com or email him at pburns32@gmail.com

Utopia Retrievers Jerry and Jane Patopea

Jerry has trained many field champions since, including one high point derby dog, two Purina award winners, three high point open dogs, and two National Amateur dogs in Canada. Jane Patopea has trained several field champions and finished many Nationals in Canada, and won the 1994 National Amateur. They both still love training field trial dogs every day.