

“Design and Construction of Field Trial Marks”

A discussion with Pat Burns and Don Driggers

Edited by Terry Rotschafer and Ted Shih

Illustration by Jean Wu; Photo by Molly Schlachter

FOR YEARS, we have discussed with one another and our friends (Robbie Bickley, Northrup Larson, Dave Rorem, Bill Eckett, Kenny Trott among others) how to improve judging.

Our discussions began with a focus on the Rule Book and then moved into a consideration of how to construct fair and effective tests - both marks and blinds - for competition. We have often heard people say that you can teach a person how to read and understand the Rule Book - and thereby evaluate dogs - but, that you cannot teach a person how to set up tests, particularly marks. We disagree and believe that you can teach a willing student the principles behind setting good marks. This series of articles is intended to accomplish just that.

We have enlisted four experienced field trial competitors: Pat Burns, Don Driggers, Jerry Patopea, and Dennis Voigt to assist us in exploring the design and construction of marking tests. In each of the articles in this series, two of our contributors, will explore overall test philosophy, practi-

cal considerations, and actual test design. Each article will begin with a description of the general weather conditions, size of the entries, and a diagram and photograph of the field.

We hope you find this series interesting and educational.

~Terry Rotschafer & Ted Shih

This is the second article in a series on the Design and Construction of Field Trial Marks. Our judges are Don Driggers and Pat Burns. They will be constructing land marks for an Amateur All-Age stake with 45 contestants. Ducks will be used at all stations. The wind is light and variable from the north as indicated in the diagram and temperatures will be moderate. Early morning dew will make the grass wet in the morning. The Amateur begins Saturday morning and is expected to be completed on Sunday.

Thursday Night Discussion:

Our judges, Don and Pat meet for cocktails Thursday night. Their apprentice, John, joins them.

Pat:

Don, good to see you again. This is our apprentice, John. Although we have known each other for many years, we have never judged together. I think it is important before we look at our field tomorrow morning that we talk about what we each like in a competitive All-Age dog, so that we can construct a test that will reveal the dog with the characteristics we want in a winning dog.

Don:

I like a dog that is flashy, hard going and invigorating. I will give a lot of leeway on blinds for a fast, hard going dog. I do not like to do key-hole blinds or blinds that are tight on the end. I think those types of blinds defeat the hard going, flashy dog. (Editors: The Rule Book mentions “style” eight times.)

Pat:

It would be my goal to find the hard going dog that is under control. I agree we don't want to reward a slow disinterested dog. If we design our marks properly, I believe we will weed out the dogs that lack courage and perseverance. I also believe that a well designed blind should reward a dog with good momentum that is well balanced.

Maybe we should talk about the flip side of the coin. Are their characteristics that you find particularly offensive in a dog? And what do you suggest we do about that if we see it during our trial?

Don:

I am not interested in watching a dog that is slow, that appears disinterested and appears not to care about what he is doing. Style is very important to me. If a dog is disinterested on its land marks and blinds, I do not want to continue to judge it. I will talk to my co-judge about dropping the dog.

John:

Are you concerned about the wet grass in the field?

Pat:

I would be more concerned about scenting up the fall area if we were using pheasants. And especially hen pheasants. But, we are using ducks in this trial. There will be plenty of scent created with dead bird practice throws and practice flyers that we shoot before we start running competing dogs. Of course, during the day, the grass will probably dry. Scenting, lighting and wind conditions will also change during the day. We don't have any control over that. We can only design our test in such a way that it is as fair as it can be for every dog.

Friday Discussion and Setup:

Don, Pat, and John go into the field that they have been assigned early in the morning so that they can assess what the morning light is. Photograph 1 and Diagram 1 show the field that they have been assigned by their sponsoring club.

Don / Pat – Photo 1 – 45 Dog Amateur



Don / Pat – Diagram 1 – 45 Dog Amateur

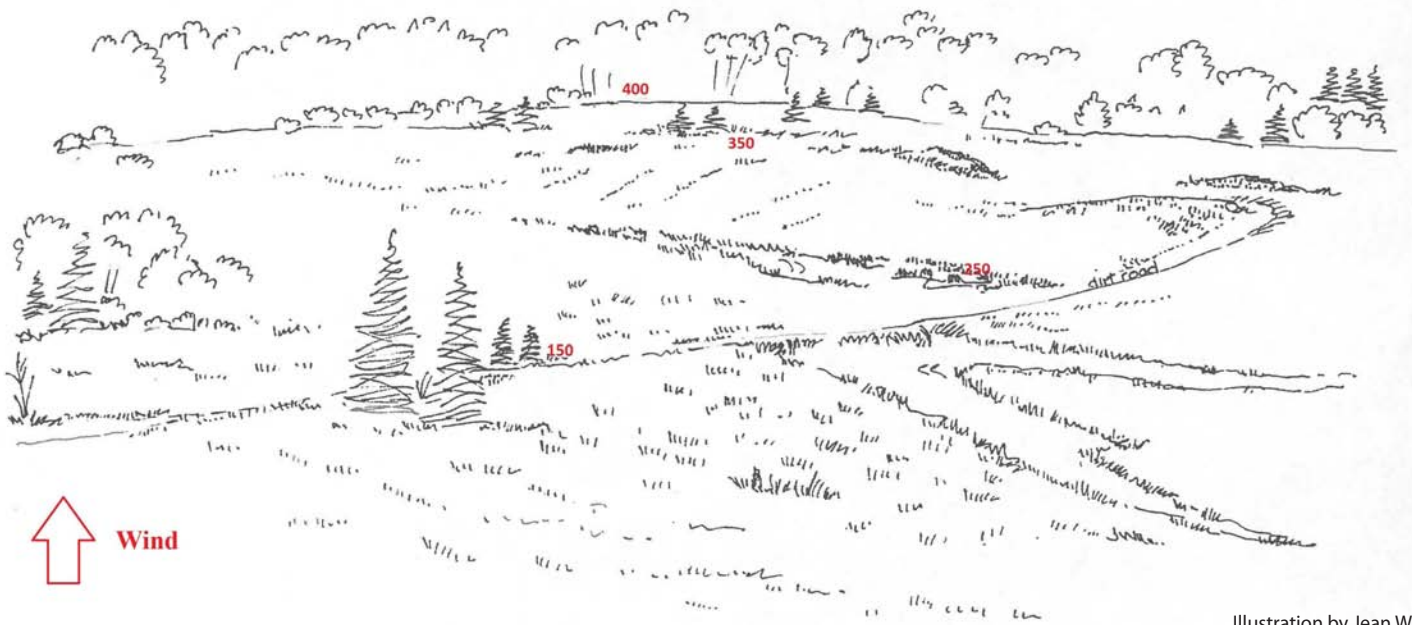


Illustration by Jean Wu

Design and Construction of Field Trial Marks

Pat:

John, I don't come into a trial with any pre-conceived notion of what kind of test I want to set up. I prefer to look at the field I am given and see what it offers.

John:

Pat, I think I know how to evaluate dog work – at least I hope I do. But, I don't know how to design or construct a test – especially, marks. What is the process you use to set up a test in the field?

Pat:

First, let's sit down in a location that gives us good visibility and faces downwind.

John:

Why is facing downwind important?

Don:

In my mind, there is nothing worse than

judging a dog that has missed a mark and is out of the area of the fall, that you know does not know where the bird is, but catches the scent of the bird cross wind, brakes, comes over and picks up the bird. I will usually call back a dog like that, but will make a note on my book as to the wind and put a question mark as to whether he actually knew where the bird was. The best way to prevent that type of situation is to make sure the bird is straight down wind. If the mark is downwind, and the dog misses the bird, he is just going to keep going right out of the test.

Pat:

I totally agree with Don regarding an earnest attempt to set up down wind marks.

John:

I think I see.

Pat:

Let's sit down and look at this field. What do you see in this field?

John:

I see two prominent trees in the foreground. I see water on the right. And I see a wall of cover on the left.

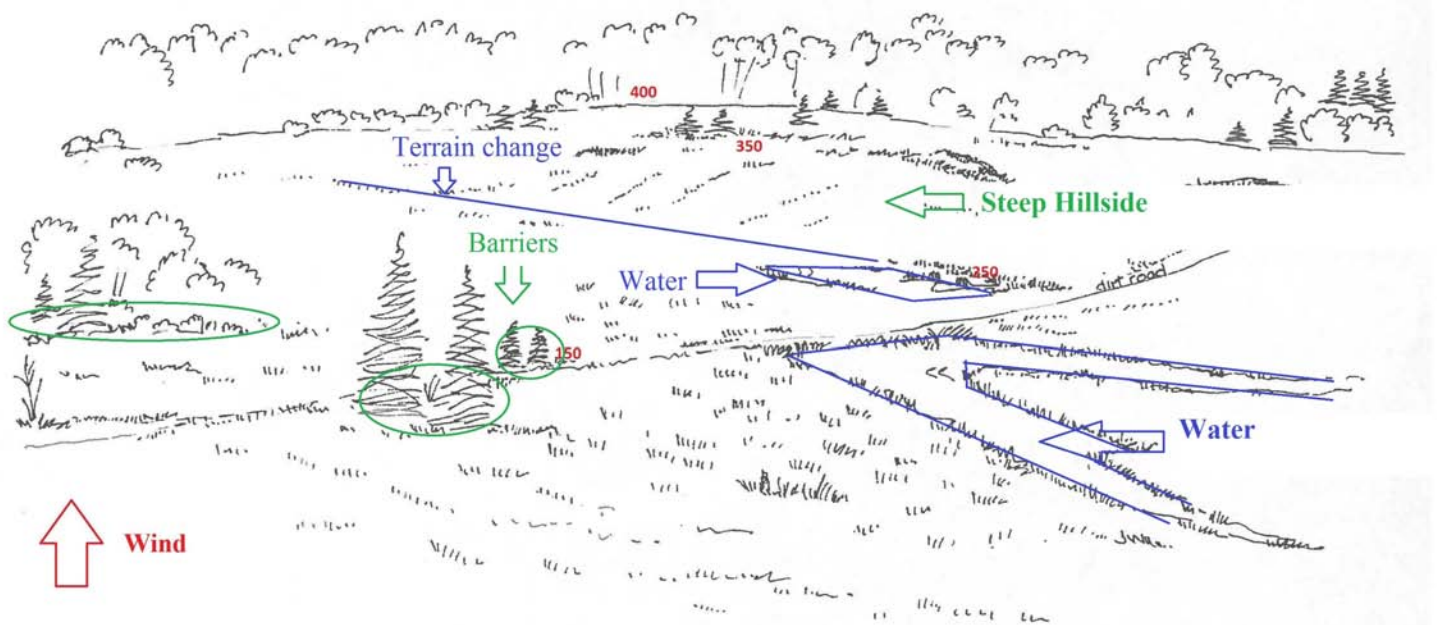
Pat:

That's a good start. Some other features that I see in this field are the road, the subtle pitch to the right on the left side of the field, the terrain change at the right back of the field and the large area to run around and get lost.

One thing worth mentioning – I have found that subtle terrain changes can play a much bigger role than dramatic ones that are easy to identify. It's that deceptive pitch to the right that I believe will enhance our bird on the left.

Diagram 2 shows the factors that Pat and John identified.

Don / Pat – Diagram 2 – 45 Dog Amateur



John:

I still don't know how to put it all together. What marks do you see in this field that would take advantage of these features?

Pat:

For all the reasons that we talked about earlier, I begin with setting up downwind marks. With a forecast of light and variable winds I am prone to wanting to spread my marks out. I am less likely to look for a short/check down bird. There is nothing more frustrating than watching a great short bird that is super chal-

lenging for half the field and a gimme for the rest. I am looking for birds that aren't overly influenced by the lines of the other retrieves. I also like to give dogs a relatively large area to hunt. I like to give high powered dogs room to think and recover.

John:

I know I am being a pest, but what do you mean by the "influence" of another line? Why do you want to give dogs room to hunt? And why do you want to give high powered dogs room to think and recover?

Don:

I try to make the marks wide open and put them in places where dogs do not want to go. It is evident, when a dog knows where the bird is, he is going to go to the bird no matter what may be in the way.

When I talk about the "influence of another line," I do not want you to pick up a bird and then bounce off of that bird with a relatively close line to go to another bird. I want you to have three independent areas where the birds are located and three independent lines

to the birds. If you make things tight, i.e., a tight hip pocket to the flyer, a dog can bounce off of the back of the flyer and wind up picking up the right hip pocket. That is a training response and not a mark. Therefore, I try to set the marks wide apart, where if you attempt to bounce off of the flyer, if you attempt to bounce off of the short bird, there is no way you are going to get the long bird.

John:

Whew! What do you see in this field?

Pat:

I see a very tough triple, which would work

well with a 45 dog Amateur.

My last bird down is a flyer on the right. It is shot angle back up on the flat. The line to that bird goes through a shallow channel of water and angles a dirt road. I can see a dog skirting the water and squaring the road putting them in a position to hunt the back side of the flyer. And if we are lucky enough to have long flyers I believe that hunt could be large.

My middle retired gun is thrown on the side slope. The line to that bird is deflected by a couple of small pines and angles a small ravine as well angling up the side slope. I believe

the dogs that don't remember that mark will be prone to driving upwind of the bird and set up a hunt up on the flat at the top of the hill. It will take a heady dog to work his way back down the side hill.

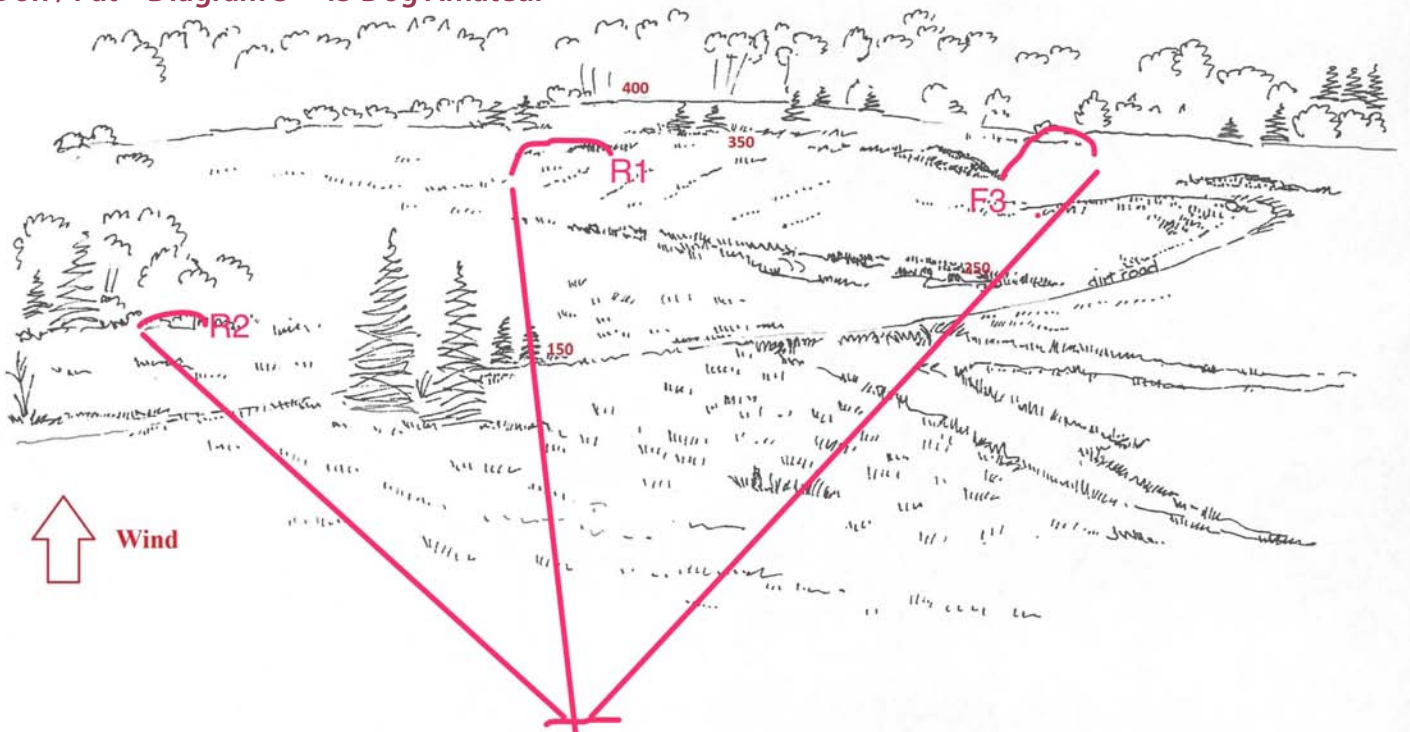
The left hand retired gun is very difficult take a straight line to. The heavy bushes are likely to force a right hand line. The dogs that don't have a good mark are likely to set up a hunt between R2 and R1.

Pat's marks are shown in Photograph 2 and Diagram 3.



Don / Pat – Photo 2 – 45 Dog Amateur

Don / Pat – Diagram 3 – 45 Dog Amateur



Pat, con't:

I am in favor of retiring both guns. I am also in favor of being generous with our call backs. I believe this test will provide ample opportunities for a high powered talented dog to stand out. I know you love to promote those qualities, too, Don.

John:

How do you decide the order in which you shoot your birds?

Pat:

I want the dogs to see the marks. With that being said, I most likely will shoot the hardest to see mark first. If I want to make the test harder, I will shoot the most difficult bird in the middle of the order. I don't mind making a dog work with the handler on line while viewing the marks go down. This is one way to encourage better line manners.

Don:

I like those marks. Let's discuss our options. Given that we have two days to judge 45 Amateur dogs, I think we have four general choices:

1. We run a triple and retire no guns at all.
2. We run a triple, retire the short gun, and keep a longer gun visible.
3. We run a triple, retire the long gun, and keep the short gun out.
4. We run a triple and retire two guns.

John:

What are the pros and cons of each option?

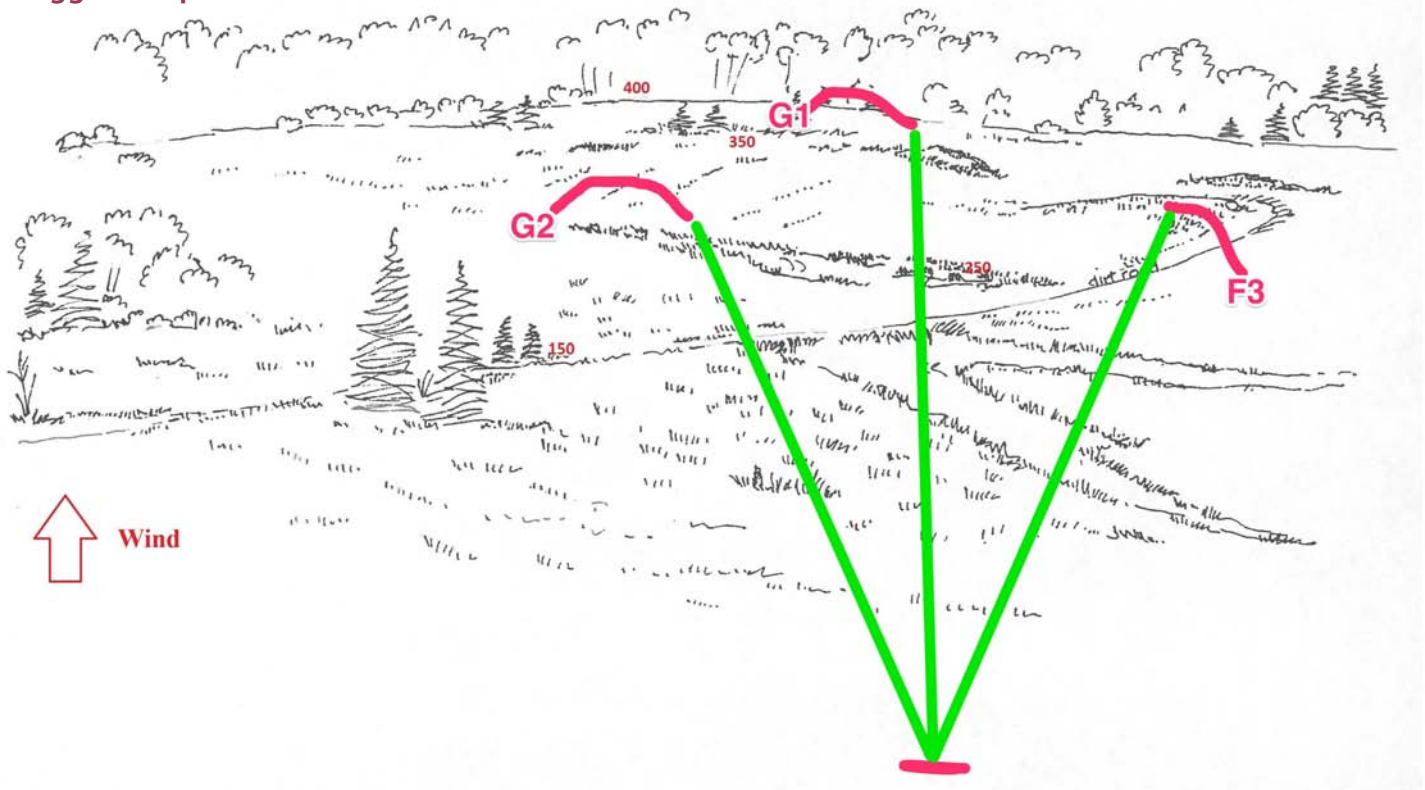
Don:

If we were to retire no guns at all, in order for this to be successful, I would suggest that we have to have the long gun very visible, with plenty of white on that gun and throw the long bird left to right. The shorter bird, on the

left side of the field, in my opinion, should be thrown left to right, with the line to the bird set up in such a way that you have visibility on the long gun as you go for that bird. The bird should be hidden snugly so it can't be smelled or seen and at the same time, the dog is running at the long gun while he is trying to pick up the shorter bird. I would suggest the shorter bird be 175 to 200 yards and the longer bird be about 400 yards. The theory is that as you run at the short gun, if you are not sure where it is, the long gun will draw you out. If we are not going to retire either bird, we have to be conscious of the fact that your pencil is probably going to be a little sharper in terms of dropping dogs. The theory would be that they are not going to be failures, but there will be 2 big hunts on 2 birds.

See Driggers Option 1

Driggers – Option 1



John:

Would you rather have failures than a sharp pencil?

Don:

I would much rather have failures than have a sharp pencil. A failure can be a handle, a failure can be a pick up or a failure can be a huge hunt out of the area, with the judges' opinion that the dog had no idea where he was, even though he may have picked the bird

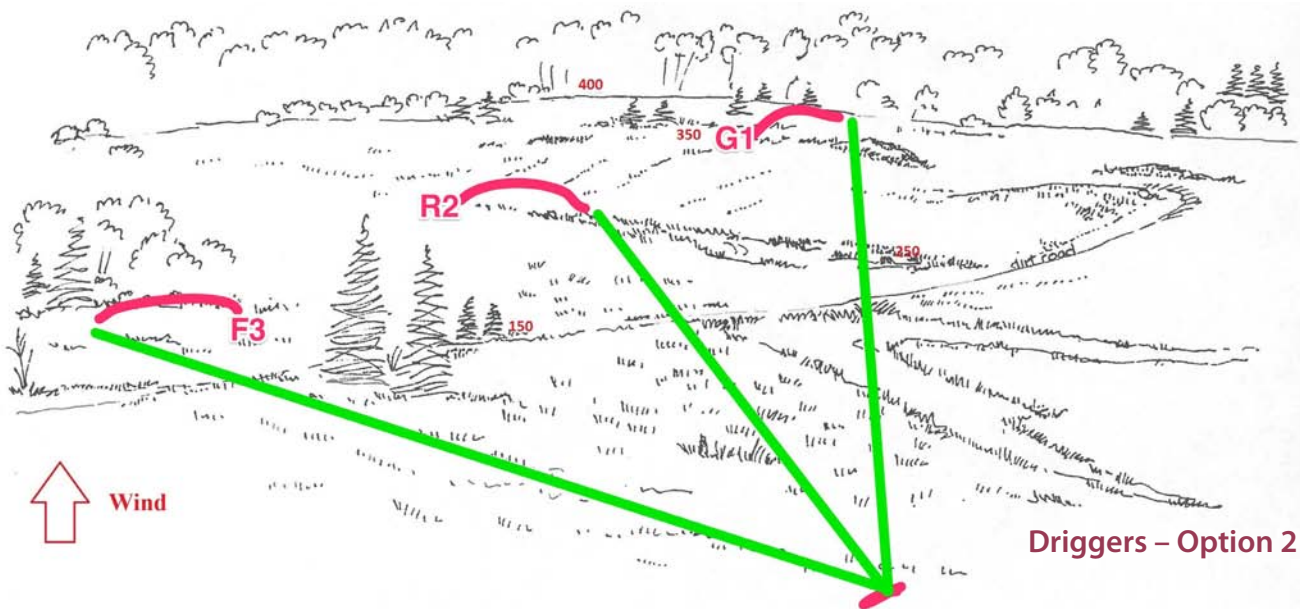
up. On many occasions, I will write on my book, on a particular mark, that this is a failure. If I have a triple on the first series and you fail a mark, I do not bring you back.

Don:

The second scenario would deal with the fact that the long gun stays out and the short gun is retired. Again, I would throw the short gun left to right so that there is substantial visibility of the long gun. I have always con-

sidered this mark to be somewhat of a trick in that if a dog comes back and if he doesn't know where the short bird is, he is going to go to the long bird. Even though he was sent for the short bird, he probably will pick up the long bird second. I usually think that a handler has to be a magician in order to pull that short bird out after you've gone for the short bird and wind up at the long bird.

See Driggers Option 2



Driggers – Option 2

Pat:

I am just concerned that if we get a wind shift or the short bird doesn't work as expected, we aren't going to have enough test.

John:

What is the danger posed by a wind shift?

Pat:

What you don't want to see is a dog that gives way to the factors (terrain, water, angles and cover) and gets rewarded by being down wind of the bird. The dreaded wind save! You try and design your test in such a way that taking a path of least resistance makes it more difficult to find the bird. There is nothing more beautiful than a great short or middle distance bird that holds up throughout the whole test. However, they are risky at best when the forecast calls for light and variable winds.

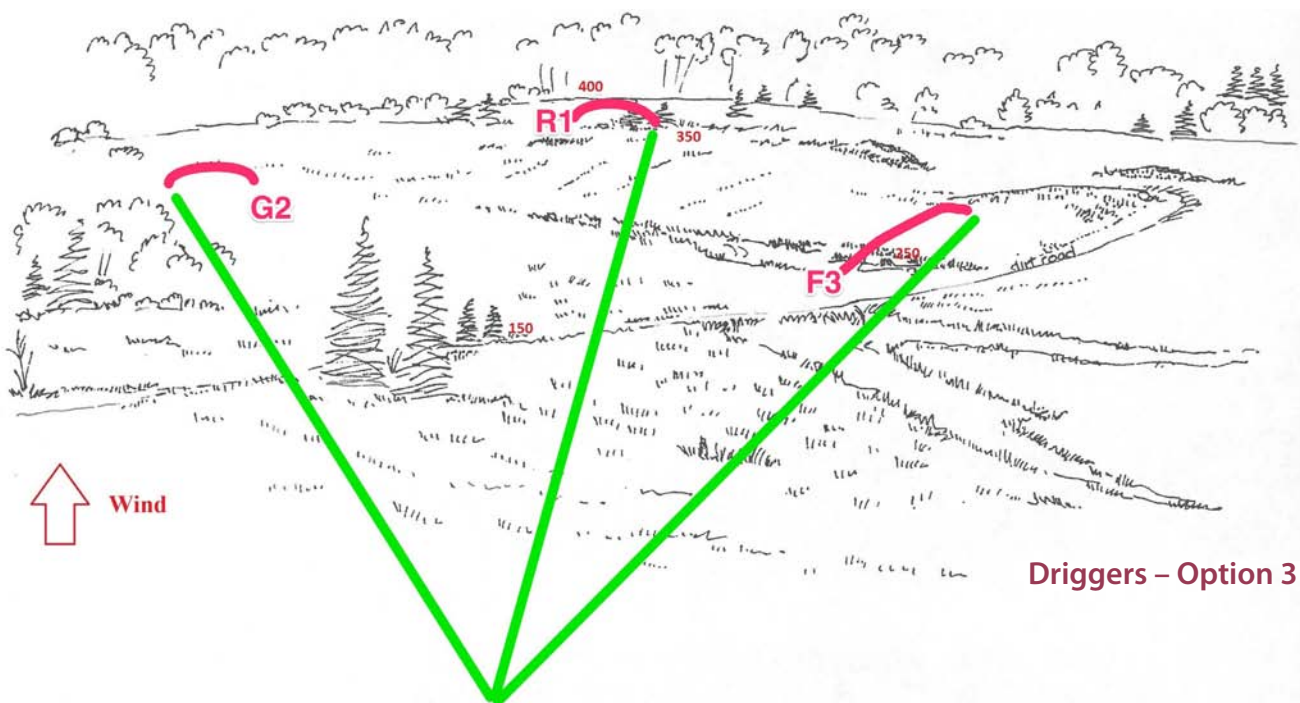
Don:

The third scenario would be to retire the long gun and leave the short gun out. If we are going to do that, I would suggest that the long gun should be thrown left to right, with the gun retiring behind the tree line that is out in the field. I would not throw the bird at the end of the field since most dogs that don't know where they are going will wind up at the end of the field. In this scenario, I would have the short bird thrown right to left. What I am trying to create there is a situation where, after you pick up the short bird and you go for the long bird, if you are not sure where the long bird is, you probably will go off of the back of the short bird and wind up out in the open space behind the long bird. Essentially, the long bird becomes a hip pocket on the flyer,

although it certainly is not a tight hip pocket. If I am going to retire 1 gun, I like this scenario better than the second scenario since I believe the second scenario has an element of a trick in it when they are driving for the short bird and they get the long bird.

In my opinion, either scenario, with 1 retired gun, you probably will lose 40 to 50 percent of the field, with most of the dogs handling on 1 of the birds. As I suggested previously, this is a small field with amateur handlers and, therefore, from a judging perspective, I don't think that you need to have both guns retired. I think if you retire either gun, you probably will lose about half of the field. If it were an open, my projections might be a little bit different. Also, with the wind straight at your back, these marks will be more difficult.

See Driggers' Option 3



Driggers – Option 3

John:

Pat started with a triple and two retired. What do you expect the success rate to be with that test?

Don:

I expect the success rate to be between 40 and 50% with two retired guns.

John:

Is it important to know what your anticipated success/failure rate in advance? Why?

Don:

In terms of your expectation as part of what goes into your planning of the event and your timing in relation to the overall event as to when you are going to finish the event. An Amateur with 45 dogs, the timing is not as critical, although you have to remember in an Amateur, you only have two days to do it. If your success rate is 40 to 50%, you are looking at the land blind coming back with 20 to 25 dogs. Assuming you finish around 2:30 to 3:00 on Saturday afternoon, you should plenty of time to do your land blind. That gives you Sunday morning to do your water blind and your water marks in the afternoon. That is the ideal scenario in terms of doing an Amateur. Therefore, your success rate on your first series becomes important in terms of timing and your ability to complete the test within a reasonable time frame. You can have conditions such as weather or poor mechanics that can extend out your time. You want to be careful of that, particularly in the Amateur, where your time is limited.

John:

Ok. My head is swimming. Which of our four options are you two going to choose and why?

Pat:

Okay, so we agree to retire one gun. And I like the idea of retiring the long middle gun versus the left hand gun. I originally wanted to throw the middle bird to the left. However, I see your point about the water that would likely divert the dogs left. You also mentioned the large area deep and left of the proposed middle retired gun. I can see where if a dog missed the middle bird by going behind the holding blind they would likely hunt deep and upwind. In regards to the left bird, are you in favor of making the bird difficult to get to or difficult to find once they get there? I also like your idea of bringing the flyer in and shooting across the water. It may give us some action on the flyer. And we all know that a large flyer hunt will drain memory for the remaining retrieves.

Don:

I like birds that are hard to reach, and then easy to find once you are there. I want to reward a dog that fights the factors and makes its way to the area of the fall. Nothing frustrates me more than seeing a dog demonstrate its marking talent by finding its way to the area of the fall for a well placed bird, then being unable to find that bird.

Pat:

I feel a little differently than Don on this subject. I do like to see a dog work in the fall area. I believe you learn a lot about a dog watching him hunt. There is nothing I love to watch more than a well placed bird IN the water. We used to call these questing marks. Any time you get a chance to test perseverance it's a good thing. You learn a lot about a dog's training when you watch his line to a fall area. You learn a lot about the dog watching him work the fall area.

Editors' Note:

We want to thank Dennis Voigt, Jerry Patopea, Don Driggers, and Pat Burns for their hard work on a complex subject – the design of field trial marks. In their two articles, our authors have applied their decades of experience to the philosophy of mark design, consideration of environmental factors in setting up marks, the identification and use of factors in establishing marks, and the consideration of what test is most appropriate for a given stake.

We look forward to your thoughts and comments on what we think is a fascinating subject. ■