

Handling Patterns for the Retriever

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

We have already covered a simple method to teach your dog to cast (take your hand signal). This method is described in our June/July, 1996, column in *Retriever Journal*. Then, in our last column, we went over how to teach a dog to stop to the whistle, and turn and look at you for your cast.

Now you can put these two skills together and begin teaching your dog to handle.

The Single "T" Pattern

First, we begin with a drill that is commonly referred to as the Single "T" pattern. To set this pattern up, visualize a baseball infield, with home plate, a pitcher's mound, and 1st, 2nd and 3rd bases. There'll be bumpers at each base. Ultimately, you'll send the dog from home plate to pitcher's mound, stop it with the whistle, then cast it "Back" to retrieve from 2nd base, or "Over" to retrieve from 1st or 3rd base. Sometimes you'll give the dog a Come-In whistle after stopping it, and have it retrieve a bumper on the way back to you. Sometimes, of course, you'll let the dog go all the way to 2nd base without stopping it.

Teach in Small Segments

You shouldn't ask your dog to perform the complete Single "T" drill from scratch the first time you present it. It's a complex drill for a beginning dog, and throwing the whole thing at the dog right away is a good way to confuse him. "Build" it for him in small, logical segments, and you'll have a confident, obedient student.

(For in-depth information on building the Single "T" and the Modified Double "T" which we discuss below, check out our book, *Tri-Tronics Retriever Training*.)

If you were thorough in teaching the whistle sit and the casting lessons, and you introduced the Single "T" pattern properly, you'll usually encounter very few problems with it. The short distances involved (about 30 yards from you to pitcher's mound) make it easy to maintain control. But when you add distance to a casting pattern, things will rapidly change, and you can count on some problems cropping up!

The Modified Double "T" Pattern

When the dog is ready for you to add distance to its handling drill work, then it's time to develop the "Modified Double T" pattern.

Benefits of the Modified Double "T"

The Modified Double "T" is a powerful drill that strengthens a retriever's lining and casting skills. The power of the drill comes from the fact that two sets of parallel lines are used (two parallel over lines, and three parallel back lines).

Concentrating on holding a line that runs parallel to another line, and running past two sets of over piles, really seems to develop a dog's ability to hold a line. The dog learns the concept of obedience to whatever line it's given-- don't deviate, don't become distracted. In short, don't wander off of the line! And when an "Over" cast is given, the dog must resist the temptation to angle in or back as it runs "Over." It learns to take an accurate, 90-degree "Over."

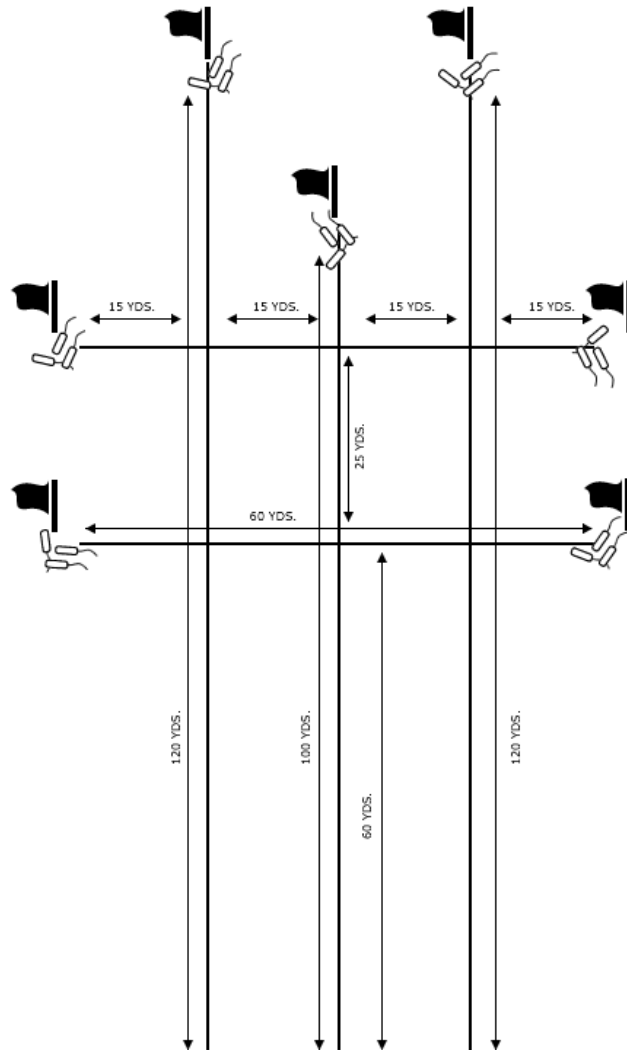
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There is another benefit of the Modified Double "T," as compared to the traditional Double "T" (two over lines, but only one back line). Each time you send the dog back on the Modified Double "T," it is going back on a different line from the one it used in the last repetition.

This feature represents a change from the traditional Double "T" drill, where every time you send the dog, you're sending it back to the same back pile. This deceptively simple change in procedure forms the habit in the young dog of not returning to an old fall.

While training on the Modified Double "T," the dog calmly assimilates the concept of "Wherever I just went last time is not where I'm supposed to go next time." It's a nice habit to instill in a retriever early during yard work, and makes training on tight multiple marks and blinds in the field much easier for the dog.

Finally, the Modified Double "T" lays a great foundation advancing your dog, because you can add more advanced concepts to a pattern drill (the Modified Double "T") the dog is already good at. This makes it possible to introduce difficult concepts in ways that make it easy for the dog to learn.



Start Simple

As with the Single "T" pattern, it's important to introduce the Modified Double "T" to a dog in small, easily digested segments. We recommend that you first spend several sessions establishing the three parallel back lines in small increments, and ensure that the dog can run these lines virtually error-free, before you add the side piles for the over lines.

A Drill for Stamina

As the dog's understanding of the drill advances, you can also really increase his stamina. As he retrieves from each pile, drop the bumpers behind you, so that you build up piles at both ends of the back lines. Then rotate his starting position around the pattern, treating the over lines as back lines, and the back lines as over lines. Now the dog is practicing 85-yard "Overs," while greatly increasing his stamina.

The "Come-In" Whistle Is Also a Cast

Our last piece of advice: Don't neglect your "Come-In" whistle. It's probably the most under-practiced cast there is. So sometimes as the dog is running out on a Back line, toss a white bumper out in front of you while he's not looking. Then stop the dog with a sit whistle, give your Come-In whistle and have him come back toward you to retrieve.

And There's More Advanced Work To Come

More advanced lessons based on use of the Modified Double "T" include adding diversion shots and marks within the pattern, having the dog drive past (or even over) old falls, having it run past such distractions as throwers, bird crates and magnum goose decoys, and, finally, teaching it to hold a line despite contrary conditions like cross winds and subtle cover changes.

You should also incorporate obstacle training in this drill by establishing some of the lines to the back piles directly over obstacles, and, based on this obstacle training, you can utilize visual aids as guides for the dog. Great for taking the "banana" out of a dog's line.

In future columns, we'll cover some of these things. In the meantime, get your young retriever ready for the challenges to come by getting started on the Single and Modified Double "T" patterns.