

Handling a Retriever: Part II

Recognizing Hazards

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs

To be a good handler you need to be able to recognize hazards and anticipate how they will affect the dog's ability to run a straight line. Obvious types of hazards are obstacles and diversions. Not so obvious hazards are distractions, contrary conditions and distance. All these hazards will adversely affect the dog's ability to carry a straight line to the bird whether running a mark or a blind.

Obstacles

Obstacles are those things that the dog perceives as easier to run around than to go over or through. Some typical obstacles are a clump of cover, a corner of water, a mound of dirt and a log. The dog will naturally want to skirt these obstacles unless trained to go through or over them (See our article about obstacle training in *The Retriever Journal*, June/July 1997 and our article called "Shore breaking", in *The Retriever Journal*, August/September 1997.)



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and a corner of water.

When attempting to get the dog to take the correct initial line for a blind retrieve, look at it from the dog's point of view. Often there will be a difference in the cover right in front of the dog. A good handler will pick out the best place to sit the dog. If possible you want to send him through a slot rather than into a piece of higher cover that might cause him to deflect off of the proper initial line. Remember, to the dog higher cover may consist of only a few taller weeds sticking up above the rest.

Diversions

A diversion is something that has happened in the area that diverts the dog's attention. A typical diversion is a dry shot, a mark, or an old fall where the dog has previously retrieved a bird.

In the case of an old fall, try to sit the dog on the line so that he is slightly angled away from the area of the diversion. Once sent the moment he begins to divert toward the old fall, stop him with a sit whistle and handle him away from the area.

However, during training if the dog doesn't take the correct initial line, call him back with "No. Here!" and start over. Move up if necessary to get the correct initial line.

Contrary Conditions

We refer to some hazards as "contrary conditions". They are subtle environmental influences that make it hard for the dog to run a straight line. Examples of contrary conditions are side wind and down hill slope. A ditch, road or channel of water becomes a contrary condition when the dog is asked to go through them at an angle. Also, running at an angle into cover or a body of water can cause the dog to deviate from running a straight line.

Unless trained to fight the push of a side wind, dogs will tend to fade (move over) with the wind. When running across the side of a hill, dogs will tend to drift down the hill.

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If the line to the bird runs at an angle across a channel of water, or a dry ditch, dogs will tend to "square the angle" across the hazard rather than carry a straight line. Running an angle across a road or dry ditch can actually cause two problems. The beginning dog will either want to square across it or run down the road or ditch.

Approaching the edge of cover at an angle may have a similar effect on the dog. This hazard often causes him to run the edge rather than hold the line and run into the cover.

Distractions

Distractions are those things that attract the dog's attention when he comes to the line. A very interesting gunner station that's easily visible is an example of a distraction. When the dog looks at an interesting distraction, the handler will have a hard time getting him to look elsewhere unless he has been trained to accept the handler's guidance.

The dog's spine may be lined up the way he is supposed to go, but the distraction has him looking elsewhere. If you send him while he is looking at a distraction, he will go where he is looking and not take the proper initial line.

This is where our "push, pull" training comes into play. If the dog has had "push, pull", you will be able to move his eyes left or right away from whatever it is that is distracting him. (See our article "Initial Lining Drills", *The Retriever Journal* April/May 1997)

Distance

There is a definite connection between a dog going out of control and the distance he is from the handler. The farther the dog is from the handler the less control the handler has over the dog. Thus, distance becomes a hazard. During training, if the dog doesn't obey a cast two times in a row, move up closer to the dog before trying to handle him again.

All of the above-described hazards increase the difficulty of getting your dog to carry a straight line. Recognizing each hazard and anticipating its affect on your dog will enable you to give a timely whistle sit just as the hazard begins to cause him to leave the line.

When training beginning dogs to run straight lines, we use three main types of training aids:

1. **Sight blinds** use a prompt such as a black and white flag the dog can easily see.
2. **Permanent blinds** use the concept of "place learning" where you repeatedly send a dog to a place where he has already had success finding something.
3. **Picture blinds** use a previously taught picture that the dog can generalize and use in a new situation. For example, once a dog is "shore broke", the inviting shoreline becomes a picture that he understands. He knows he must swim straight and not turn into the shore when sent on a line that is parallel to it. Now, when sent on a line that runs parallel to the shore, he will recognize the "picture" and carry a straight line to the blind.

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These three training aids help maintain confidence and momentum in the young dog while he is learning to go through obstacles and past diversions. For more information on using these techniques see our article "Transition to Cold Blinds", *The Retriever Journal*, Feb/March 1998.

Having a dog run a straight line takes teamwork. You must recognize the hazards that influence him and be prepared to blow that whistle in a timely manner. Also recognizing hazards at the line and sitting the dog so that he has the best possible chance of taking a straight initial line is your job. And, of course the dog must be trained to negotiate hazards if you want him to run straight.

In our next article, "Handling a Retriever-Part 3", we will discuss the differences in the way you should handle a beginning dog as opposed to the way you handle an experienced dog.