

Line Manners — Part I

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

It's surprising how many people contact us about the problems they are having getting a highly excited retriever to the line.

Often, these are dogs who have been taught to "heel" as part of their basic obedience, and do it well in a calm situation. They have a season of actual hunting under their belts, and they hunted well — with all their training basically holding up.

However, after a few field events, they unravel from the excitement so completely they're not even doing "poor heeling." They stop listening to their owner, and seem completely unreachable by the attempted corrections. To add to the puzzle, once this "renegade" *gets* to the line, his teamwork and manners are often quite satisfactory.

We will assume that heel has been taught well in the first place. Therefore, "going to the line" really isn't addressed through doing more training on heeling. Under event conditions, the dog becomes much more excited than he is during yard work. More yard work doesn't accomplish the goal of training the "same dog" you'll actually run. What needs to be done is to train the dog to "go to the line" in the highly excited mental state he'll be in at a hunt test or field trial.

The phenomenon of the dog unraveling at an event is often labeled "test wise" or "collar wise," but it isn't exactly that either, at least not at first. (It can rapidly become that, if corrective measures are bungled.) What is really happening is that the dog is being asked to do something (heel obediently when highly excited) that he has never been truly prepared for, because all his moving heel work has been done when the dog is not excited.

We've found that a good way for many trainers to prevent the problem — or get control of it once it develops — is to "teach" their dog a couple of "going-to-the-line" exercises. Then they should regularly practice these exercises at training days, picnic trials, and yes, even at events (we'll explain how). This approach has the effect of teaching the dog that "getting to the line" is a special situation. The dog needs to be just as aware of his job when "going to the line" as he is when doing any of his other work, whether that is remaining steady, taking a line, stopping to a whistle, or responding to casts.

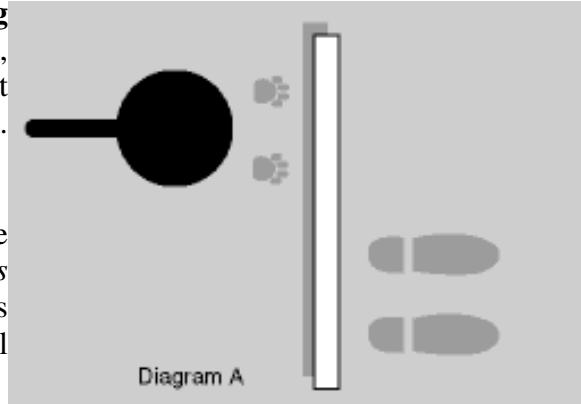
You sometimes see people attempt to deal with "getting to the line" problems through intimidation and harsh corrections. This treatment subdues the dog. Once subdued, he will heel to the line properly as a by-product of the fact that he is no longer excited. This training approach is not uncommon, but it tends to be a temporary fix. Soon the handler finds himself needing to leave the grounds between every series to "adjust Fido's attitude" just to get enough carry-over for one more trip to the line!

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We recommend that handlers *teach* their dogs a "going to the line" skill instead of just subduing a rambunctious dog with corrections. The special skill consists of the dog realizing that the trip to the line is a matter of "following my handler." When the field dog goes to the line, his job is to "follow his handler," not to "lead the parade."

Exercise # 1. Lining up at heel without getting out in front. Introduce this as a basic yard drill, away from the line, and even away from the field at first. Lay a visible white stick or rod on the ground. You want something the dog can easily see.

Practice heeling and stopping at the stick, so that the dog's front feet are behind it. Stop so that your *heels* are just in front of the stick (see the diagram). This helps the dog define (maybe redefine!) the heel position as not being in any way out in front of you.



Help the dog figure this out. Use your leash and an "early" sit command just before stopping to help the dog learn where you want him to sit. When the dog understands this, you can reinforce with the e-collar, by making the dog's decision to get in front of the stick unpleasant.

Once the dog can stop accurately behind the stick in a calm situation, start giving fun bumpers between repetitions to animate the dog and keep him excited — more like he will feel at the field event. (Remember, once basics are mastered, your goal should generally be to train the "same dog" you'd be running.) to the first and about six feet away. Leave the dog sitting with his front feet just behind the first stick as you advance to the second stick and place your heels against it. Look over your shoulder, make eye contact with the dog, and call him to join you in the heel position. Reinforce the behavior of the dog stopping with his front feet *behind* that stick, while yours are just in front of the stick. Take the new set of skills to the field. Do this with your training group when a test is set up in the field. There should be a holding blind about 15 feet before the line, and also an *obvious* line with a couple of folding chairs and at least one other person standing by them. Have at least one dog run the test while your dog waits in the blind and hears the excitement of guns going off. (This last step is actually more important than the common practice of having someone yell, "Guns up!!!! Dog to the line!!!")

In order to be allowed to go to the line, the dog must learn to let you "lead the parade." So he must *wait in the blind* as you walk about four feet away from the blind, and toward the line. Then he is to join you on command, in that nice new heel position you've taught.

The first parts of this — wait in the blind — is nothing more than "Sit" and don't break. Correct the dog if he breaks to come to you before you call him. The dog must accept that "letting the person leave first" is going to be part of going to the line.

Now, from your position outside the blind, call the dog to heel. Be a very critical judge of where the dog "lands" when he joins you. You must be absolutely consistent, particularly at first.

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Any time you must correct the dog for being out in front of you, take him right back into the holding blind. Do not just correct the dog and then continue to advance toward the line.

Taking the dog back to the holding blind is a very important, maybe the most important, part of the correction. Dogs that have a lot of desire desperately want to get to the line, and are all too willing to take a physical correction as long as they still advance their goal of moving forward toward the line.

So, as a part of the "correction" if the dog stops farther out in front of you than the heel position, he has to return to the holding blind and start from square one, each and every time! (If, after several repetitions, he simply cannot figure out where the "heel position" is when he joins you, you should lay your white stake back on the ground as a visual aid to help him be successful.)

Set this procedure up in training and repeat, repeat, repeat until you see understanding. You will need some patient training buddies the first day, because of all the trips back into the holding blind, but once the "light bulb comes on," the dog *will* understand.

Whenever the dog stops where he should, begin heeling toward the line, *thus rewarding the dog*. If the dog jets out in front of you once you begin traveling toward the line, its back into the holding blind for a whole new start. (If you find that the dog simply cannot figure out how to maintain the heel position after a several such corrections, it is a good bet that he really doesn't know the heel position as well as you thought, and some on-leash yard work *would* be in order).

Note that this whole procedure ties in with what you can actually do at an event. You can always start the trip to the line by leaving the blind first, and calling the dog to you. Now you have a reality check and a chance at regaining control if things seem to be slipping.

If you see the dog make a serious effort to put on the brakes and stop in the heel position with you, you know that things will probably go well and you can start your trip to the line with confidence. If you see "way too much" exuberance as the dog rushes to join you, you can quickly return to the blind once and calmly start again. The fact that you have previously conditioned the dog to believe that you will stubbornly return to the blind as many times as it takes will make one re-start at an event a "wake up call" for the dog, and help reestablish control before things unravel beyond recovery.

Exercise # 4. Put both "new tricks" together. When your dog is a model citizen at staying in the blind and joins you in a cautious and civilized fashion, put your two white stakes out on the ground again, one at the line, the other six feet before the line.

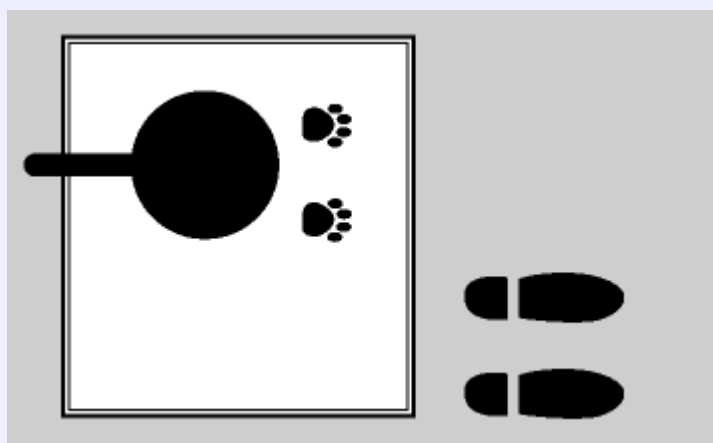
Now the dog has to stay in the blind as you step out, join you at heel (not even a half-inch ahead of standard), walk to the first stick, stop and sit in the correct position, wait while you walk to the next stick and put your heels against it, and join you on command in the correct position.

When the dog is smooth at this, don't always stop at the first stick; sometimes heel to the line in the normal fashion.

Basically, this procedure gives the dog two new exercises to concentrate on while en route from the blind to the line, and sets a standard for both handler and dog to live by. You won't have the sticks at an event of course, so gradually phase them out in training, but sometimes act like they're there and make the dog do the double stop.

Training Platforms

In earlier *RJ* columns (Feb./Mar., 1996, June/July, 1996, and Aug./Sept., 1996), we've covered some of the uses of training platforms ("Place Boards") for retriever training. If your dog understands place boards from earlier work, incorporating this tool into your heel-to-line training can be very helpful.



There are two places in particular where place boards help a dog learn what you expect in connection with the whole "getting to the line" procedure.

First, they can help when you introduce waiting in the holding blind and allowing the handler to leave first.

Second, platforms help a dog understand that sitting in the heel position means *not* sitting out in front of you (unless you sit him there on purpose, as you might for some scenarios at a hunt test). If your dog has an understanding of platforms, sit him on one at the line, as you stand just in front of it with your heels against it (see the diagram). He will become used to sitting slightly behind you. Then, when you go to the sticks on the ground, you'll find he catches on very quickly as to where he should be in relationship to your body.

