

Line Manners – Part II

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Good Line Manners Help with Marking

In part I of our "Line Manners" series, (October/November'98), we described some techniques to help handlers heel highly excited retrievers to the line without both dog and handler becoming unraveled. Now that you're both *at* the line, we'll talk about how line manners can improve your chances of success in the marking tests at hunt tests and field trials.

A dog marks what he sees, and your first priority when you bring a dog to the line for marks should be making sure that he really does focus on each bird as it goes down. Good line manners help a lot here. You'll also want to rely on line manners when you line the dog up for each bird, persuading him to disregard distractions. Finally, good line manners (including alignment skills) can even help a dog complete the honor.

Teamwork or a Battle of the Wills – Which Will It Be?

Getting a dog's cooperation at the line in a marking test can become a battle of the wills between the dog and handler, or it can be an expression of smooth teamwork. The dog can be determined to look only at the spot in the field which appears most interesting to him, convinced that his handler is a pest to be ignored, or he can welcome his handler's participation because it furthers his own agenda of getting the birds!



Once you are at the line and the mark is thrown, do you take a back seat to the dog...



...or does he stay sitting correctly in the heel position?

Procedures for Multiple Marking Tests

Procedures at the line depend on whether you are running a hunt test or a field trial, but the goals are generally the same in both sports. They include helping the dog see all the birds thrown, and helping him pick up each bird — especially the difficult memory marks.

Before Sending the Dog

At a licensed trial, the first step is to make sure that your dog has seen each gunning or throwing station before you call for the birds. Since some stations may be much more difficult for the dog to see than others, he may need your help in locating them.

Once the dog locates the throwers, the next step is ensuring that the dog stays solidly focused on the first station to throw. He must maintain that focus long enough for you to signal the judges, the judges to signal the thrower, and the thrower to make the throw. Chances are that the first bird down is a long bird, and there are closer, more attractive throwing stations in the picture. Again, your dog needs to stay calm and focus obediently on the long throw, despite the attraction of the other stations.

As the birds are thrown, the dog, in response to subtle motion from his handler, should obediently move his focus to each station in the order that the birds will go down. He should also watch each throw completed — fighting the temptation to watch only the flier.

At a hunt test, the above picture changes somewhat. First, you are not allowed to identify the gunning stations to the dog ahead of time in the fashion that is allowed at field trials. What's more, the throwing stations may be "hidden guns," which are not at all visible to the dog from the line until the action starts. But you can identify the zones of probability to the dog simply by the way you approach the line.

The hunt test scenario may require that the dog begin marking while walking at heel (a "walk-up"). Or it may require that the dog mark while in a position remote from the handler ("remote marking"). These techniques are permitted in the licensed field trials, but not frequently seen there.

Although these situations add challenge, don't just "throw up your hands" and let nature take its course. You can help the hunt test dog, as well as the field trial dog, benefit from handler input.

Retrieving Multiple Marks

After the marks are down, the techniques you'll use to align the dog to them for each retrieve will often be similar at both licensed trials and hunt tests. (However, occasionally a hunt test scenario will require you to remote-send your dog for the first bird to be retrieved.)

As your dog returns with a retrieved bird, face the direction of the next bird to be retrieved. The dog should line up in the heel position facing the way you are. If he doesn't quite achieve this, quickly align his spine in the correct direction.

Have the dog focus towards his next bird. Settle him on where he's going before you take delivery of the bird he's carrying. Take delivery without disturbing his focus, and confirm his line for him. Then send him.

How do you "confirm a line" for a dog? Once a dog is sitting and looking in the right direction, some dogs benefit from cues confirming that they've got the right line. Depending on how you train, this might be verbal cue ("Good" or "That's it" are often used), or the cue might be the fact that you put your hand over the dog's head just before sending. If you want to use such cues, teach them to your dog in lining drills.

One final tip: Remove the delivered bird from your dog's view by holding it behind you until after he has been sent for his next bird. Once he's left your side, you can give the retrieved bird to the judge or put it in your bird pouch if called for by the scenario. Don't interfere with your dog's concentration by fiddling around with the bird before you send him.

The Basic Skills

Some key basic obedience skills will help your dog watch the marks go down and retrieve them successfully.

- 1. Obedient heeling.** The dog who insists on being eight feet out in front of his handler is hardly in a position to receive his handler's alignment input!
- 2. A stable Sit.** The dog must sit *when and where told to*. If he's at heel, he should sit with his front feet just behind the plane of your own feet. He also should not move anywhere after sitting, unless and until cued to do so. We've all seen the dog who heels nicely to the line, but sits down two feet in front of his handler. Every time the frustrated handler steps forward to "line up" at heel, the dog steps forward too. This is a dog who is making sure that his handler "stays in the back seat"!
- 3. Spinal alignment.** The dog should understand how to pivot his sitting body left or right on your cue, without forward motion. Note that if he has a good understanding of the "heel position," spinal alignment will happen automatically when you face a particular direction, and you will not need to fiddle with him once he has sat down. This is particularly important at hunt tests, where any such "fiddling" can be interpreted as your attempt to point out gunning stations before calling for the birds.
- 4. Obedience of visual focus.** The well-schooled dog should understand how to let you "pick the spot" when the situation calls for it. He should let you shift his visual focus either left or right, without moving his body. Typically this left-right cue is given with a subtle motion from your leg. This training has obvious use when you are lining the dog up to retrieve the desired memory bird and cueing him to disregard distractions that could pull him away from it.

But it can also help the dog enormously while the birds are being thrown. A dog with this understanding can "follow your lead," and let you direct his focus — with quiet motion toward each fall — in sequence as the birds are thrown. He will then have the maximum opportunity to see each mark. (At a hunt test, do not give any such motion cues toward the next throwing station until *after* its attraction shot or call has occurred, or the bird is in the air.)

- 5. Stability of visual focus.** In certain situations, you would also like your well-schooled dog to understand that he *stays* focused on a particular spot until cued to focus elsewhere. For example, on your cue, he should *maintain continuous focus* on a selected throwing station, and resist his natural desire to look elsewhere — such as at the flier guns or the Winger! Also, stability of visual focus includes staying focused on each thrown bird until it is on the ground (i.e., the dog is not "head swinging").

Basic Training Foundation

Like all dog training, your dog's reliability in performing such trained-in skills depends on thorough preparation. Certain drills that we've described in our earlier columns (*RJ*: Feb./Mar., 1997; Apr./May, 1997; and Feb./Mar., 1998) develop some of the skills needed. And there are additional exercises that will strengthen the dog's abilities, particularly those calling for visual focus. In a future column, we'll get into the specifics.

Maintaining a Dog's Working Attitude on Line

Many dogs "boil over" on line, and lose their ability to perform a test that they should be able to complete successfully.

Excitement on the line is your enemy; keeping the dog calm, cool and collected is your goal. If you allow the dog to "boil over" and become a scatter brain on the line, the odds are not good that he will be able to pass a difficult test. He will not concentrate on where the birds fall, decreasing the accuracy of his marking. And he won't pay enough attention to you for you to be able to get him to look where you want him to go.

We encourage handlers to maintain a strict standard as to what constitutes "sit" at the line. First of all, it's **FOUR ON THE FLOOR!** The dog must learn to remain sitting with his front feet on the ground — no hopping up and down with the front feet.

Second and obvious, "Sit" means that the butt stays on the ground, not hovering four inches up in the air. What's not so obvious to many is how to maintain this standard. Once the dog has completed yard work and is steady, the correction in the field for raising the butt should be just as serious as one that you'd give that particular dog for breaking.

Keeping both the dog's butt and his front feet on the ground will not only help prevent breaking, but it will also help to keep the dog calm, cool and collected. In other words, it will help maintain the dog's "working attitude" on line.