

Teaching a Dog to Mark — Part I

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

The dog with the great mark knows exactly where the bird is. He may or may not carry a straight line to it, but as he approaches the area of the fall, he's like a bird setting his wings to land on a pond. His head is up, his eyes are looking, his ears are forward; his whole demeanor says, "It's right here!"

The ability to mark is not precisely the same thing as the ability to complete complex multiple marking tests. In some training programs, much time is spent on training skills which will help the dog average out well in advanced marking tests; are these technical skills, handler cues, etc., truly "marking"? Whatever your opinion, there's no doubt that the confident dog that knows where the bird went down independent of training cues will have a head start on completing any marking test.

Can you train "pure marking"?

Is there anything to train on apart from the myriad technical skills involved in performing advanced marking tests? This topic isn't written about very often. A widely held view in the retriever game is that "great markers are born, not made." And there's a frequently stated corollary: "You really can't do anything to teach marking." While we certainly acknowledge the role of genetics in producing great markers, we don't agree with the corollary. You can definitely help a dog become the very best marker his genetics will allow.

Training for the "Spot on the Ground"

From observing dogs' performances on marked retrieves, we're convinced that strong markers understand their destination (bird or bumper) as a "spot on the ground." We also think that weak marking can be the result of the dog not having this "spot on the ground" understanding of the marking task.

Weak markers have a different understanding of marks. To these dogs, the sight of the falling bird signifies that there is a *zone of probability* out there. The dog believes that if he goes out and hunts in that area, he can find a bird.

Frequently, the "zone hunter" drops his nose as he gets to the area of the fall, and may even run within a yard of a bird lying on bare dirt and never see it. This happens because the dog's head is down and he is "thinking" through his nose alone. It doesn't occur to him to *look* for birds lying on the ground.

As the nose-down marker hunts for his bird, he tends to lose track of where to hunt. He often ends up well away from the "zone" as he first identified it. He then needs special drills to learn to

compensate, so that he will confine his hunt to a particular cued area (based on proximity to the thrower, etc.).

He will generally recover the bird, but his working style will not produce the most efficient marking performance. He is more vulnerable to drifting with the wind and working himself completely away from the bird than is the dog who is thinking "spot," and using his eyes to stay oriented.

In addition, a hunt on each bird is often needed. The longer the dog is out there hunting, the greater the chance that he will forget about birds yet to be retrieved.

Avoiding mistakes

In dog training, how you introduce an activity will strongly affect the dog's understanding of the task and his approach to performing it. Bad habits are hard to eradicate. So our first piece of advice about marking young dogs is a list of "don'ts."

Don't throw early marks into cover or other areas where the dog can't see the retrieve object as he approaches. Don't throw things — like camouflage or orange bumpers — that a dog can't easily see on the ground! Don't throw marks that are so long that they exceed a youngster's natural navigational skills. Such marks encourage the pup to run at the thrower, which is the only thing he can relate to from such a distance. Don't throw marks that frequently require thrower help to get the pup to the bird.

First things first: The joy of retrieving precedes "marking"

When you start a pup — or inexperienced adult for that matter — remember that *retrieve desire* must precede "marking practice." You must build a pup's enthusiasm for simple retrieving before trying for any loftier goals involving marking.

Also, when you start marking a pup, respect his physical limitations. Two or three marks per session should be the norm; not a lot of "walking singles" like you'd do with an older dog. Be especially conservative about setting up water retrieves, especially if the weather isn't warm. The pup won't enjoy learning if retrieving makes his feet sore, his body exhausted, or he sits in his crate shivering after making a cold water retrieve.

Finally, a youngster needs certain good habits to support marking practice. There are some retrieving, returning, and delivery mechanics that have to be in place before a youngster should do a lot of any kind of retrieving. How much formal obedience is needed to support beginning marking practice varies with each dog and handler team. *Do not try to develop marking in a dog that won't come back to you or mishandles his birds or bumpers.* You'll be developing bad habits that can be very difficult to reverse.

The elements of marking

Success on retrieving a single mark includes certain elements:

- ◆ **"How to get out there."** This could be either the coveted straight line to the fall, or an efficient journey to the fall without the dog becoming disoriented and lost.
- ◆ **"When to stop."** This means the dog has an accurate gauge on depth — i.e. where to end his trip to the bird.
- ◆ **"An effective hunt."** This element consists of a successful hunting pattern should the dog fail to pin the bird. Dogs that conceptualize the "spot on the ground" have a leg up on accomplishing all three elements listed above. (When retrieving multiple marks, one more element comes into play: the dog's ability to remember the existence of the memory birds.)

Staying focused on "the spot on the ground"

To begin teaching the "spot on the ground" concept, you should start by having the dog learn to keep his eyes glued on the fall as he runs out to it.

This automatically accomplishes the first element — getting out there. And with the simple beginner's mark, it also accomplishes the second element—when to stop. Since the bird or bumper is always lying in the open, the dog that never takes his eyes off the target will always know where to stop. *Later on*, some other types of marks can help him conceptualize that he must slow down and stop to get his bird even when he can't see it on the ground. But *first things first*. Before progressing to anything else, develop the young dog's habit of keeping *his focus locked on the fallen target* while running out to get it.

Go to the trouble to set your beginning marking up correctly. You'll be glad you did. Here are some tips:

The right field. To develop total focus on the "spot on the ground," you can't beat the formula of beginning marking practice on totally clean ground, typically a field with short mowed grass such as a soccer field. When you set up the marks, look the field over carefully. The beginner should not be distracted from the target object by competing visible objects such as food wrappers, sprinkler heads, cow flops, rocks, clumps of grass, etc.

The right retrieve object. Use only prominent retrieve objects that the pup can *readily* see from a distance as he approaches. *Clean* white bumpers are preferred for the very first marks. The youngster with some experience should graduate to large black bumpers that stand *well above* the height of any ground cover. For longer marks, where contrast with the background is very important so that the dog can follow the arc, two-tone (half-black, half-white) bumpers are ideal. In short, don't throw anything that the dog will have trouble seeing in the air or on the ground.

The right wind. *Early marks should be thrown down wind.* You want to make sure that the pup doesn't use his nose to guide him to the fall.

Visual continuity. *The pup must be able to see the bumper lying on the ground for the entire time he runs out to it.* Remember that he's shorter than you are, so it's wise to kneel down and look at the destination from his level when you set up the mark.

The training goal. If your youngster's visual focus on the bumper is sort of off-again, on-again, and kind of wanders around as he runs out to make the retrieve, we advise you to simplify the mark. The habit of a wandering visual focus can come back to haunt you later. Establish the dog's skill of keeping his eyes glued to where he's going (namely, on a highly visible retrieve object). Later you do want him looking around as he enters a fall area, but first develop the locked-on focus. That style is what will *get him to the fall area most reliably, whether or not the target is still visible.*

Some dogs — ones that have very sensitive tendencies or that lack retrieve desire — will never learn to keep their eyes on what they are going to retrieve, no matter how easy you make it for them. But most retrievers learn this first step — unbroken visual lock — very easily.

Your thrower is important

After you send the pup to retrieve, it is impossible to know exactly what his eyes are doing. *However, your thrower can tell.* An observant thrower who knows what you are trying to achieve in your early marking practice is essential.

It's also important that your thrower have a good throwing arm. There are real advantages to a long throw that lands well away from where the thrower stands, especially for beginning markers.

That newest generation of dog training gadgetry, the mechanical thrower, can be very useful to produce the healthy-sized throws that are desirable for beginning marking. But if you use one for marking young dogs, have a person standing out there with the apparatus so that the dog can be helped if need be.

And speaking of helping the dog, *before* you send your thrower out to throw for the puppy, coach him on when and how to help if the pup gets lost or tries to return without the bumper. Some of the subtle techniques that throwers can use with older dogs to cue them where to look for the mark will not work with puppies. Techniques for helping young pups include: re-attracting the lost pup with sound and throwing a second bumper while he's looking at the thrower; attracting the pup with sound and motion so as to help direct him to find the one already thrown; or slipping in another bird or bumper while the pup is *not* looking and placing it in a location where the pup will easily find it.

Remember, if your marks are set up correctly the need for thrower help will be rare or nonexistent at this early stage. If you find your puppy is frequently needing thrower help, you need to simplify your marks.

Position the thrower to minimize his influence on the marking "picture"

For a young puppy's very first retrieves that are thrown by someone else (not your own hand thrown retrieves), the distance from the dog to the fall should be *less than* the distance from the fall to the thrower. See Diagram No. 1. This geometry helps establish the puppy's habit of looking at the fall and not the thrower after the bumper is on the ground. It also helps the pup naturally return to you with the bumper, rather than go visit the thrower.

As you gradually lengthen the marks, you cannot maintain this geometry, of course. So now, to keep the pup's focus on nothing but the fall as he runs out to get it, try to position the thrower where, although he will still be visible, he will be somewhat out of the picture as the pup runs toward the mark. For example, place him on the other side of a path or cover strip from where the fall lands. When this is not possible, use square ("flat") throws, because they visually separate the thrower from the fall better than angle back throws. See Diagram No. 2.

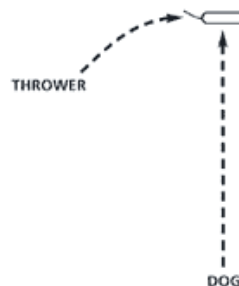
DIAGRAM 1

When you introduce the young pup to the idea of someone out there doing the throwing, use a slightly "in" throw, and have the line to the fall shorter than the distance between the bumper and the thrower. This helps develop the early habit of returning to you instead of visiting the thrower.



DIAGRAM 2

This is an "angle-back" throw. It invites the dog to associate the retrieve object with the person who threw it.



This is a square or "flat" throw. It reduces the visual connection between the retrieve object and the person who threw it.



Be sure that the pup can see the thrower before the throw is made. Learning to maintain focus on a thrower in the field until the throw commences is an important part of what you want a hunt test or field trial prospect to learn.

In future columns, we'll cover the next steps for developing your pup's mastery of the elements of marking.

The thrower/fall relationship for the advanced dog

In technical configurations involving multiple marks for all-aged field trial stakes, the advanced dog may sometimes need to use the relationship between a thrower and a particular fall to help him succeed.

In general, it's best that a dog learn any needed "fall/thrower relationship" program as part of his more advanced training, not as part of his beginning marking development. We think a retriever will be a better *marker* if he first learns to truly mark a destination independently of the thrower relationship.

In short, get him to "believe in the spot" before he starts relying on other cues.