

Teaching a Dog to Mark — Part III

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

This is the third column in our series on developing marking ability in young retrievers.

Introducing a Pup to Cover

In our last two articles, we stressed the importance of getting your young retriever to use his eyes when marking. He needs to learn to use his eyes BEFORE he becomes dependent on his nose.

The pup will have trouble learning to use his eyes if you throw his first marks in cover. With cover obscuring the retrieve object, he'll quickly learn that scent tells him the location of the object he seeks. So early marks for young retrievers should always land in the open, even if the dog will be passing through cover on the way out.

But you don't want your pup unwilling to penetrate or hunt in cover simply because he's always expected the bird or bumper to be lying in the open. So now its time to introduce cover. One good way to do this is to hand throw a bumper into cover so that it lands a VERY short distance from the dog, - no more than 10 feet.

Also, throw so the bumper lands only a foot or two into the cover. From such a close distance, the dog can see exactly where it fell. A few such retrieves and he will be eager to hunt cover. Then he will be ready for some longer marks that fall in cover.

To keep him from just hunting wildly all over the place, or pushing through the cover and running around in the open space beyond, keep these marks short at first, quite a bit shorter than the other marks you throw for him. This way he will be able to let his eyes tell him that the mark fell INTO the cover, and he should confine his hunt and root it out. He will develop good habits instead of poor ones.

Lengthening a Dog Out

The first rule when lengthening a dog out is to do it GRADUALLY, and only after laying a good foundation with shorter marks. Retriever pups rarely lack enthusiasm for marks, so it's tempting to lengthen them out too quickly. If the marks are too long for the pup's level, he will start marking the thrower and some of the motion, rather than the fall itself.

Once you start lengthening out the marks, another common mistake is to build distance too rapidly. This mistake can have the same undesirable consequence as lengthening too soon. In both situations, the dog may learn to run straight at the thrower. Then, when he is a few yards from the thrower, he'll finally veer off to the side and set up a hunt. We would prefer that the young retriever develop the habit of running straight at the fallen bird instead!

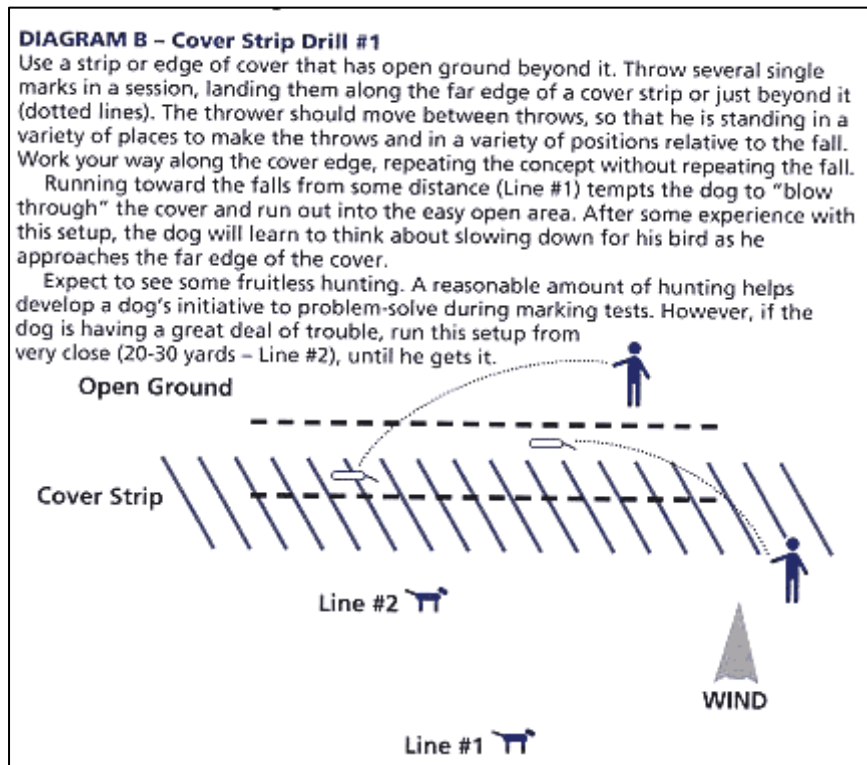
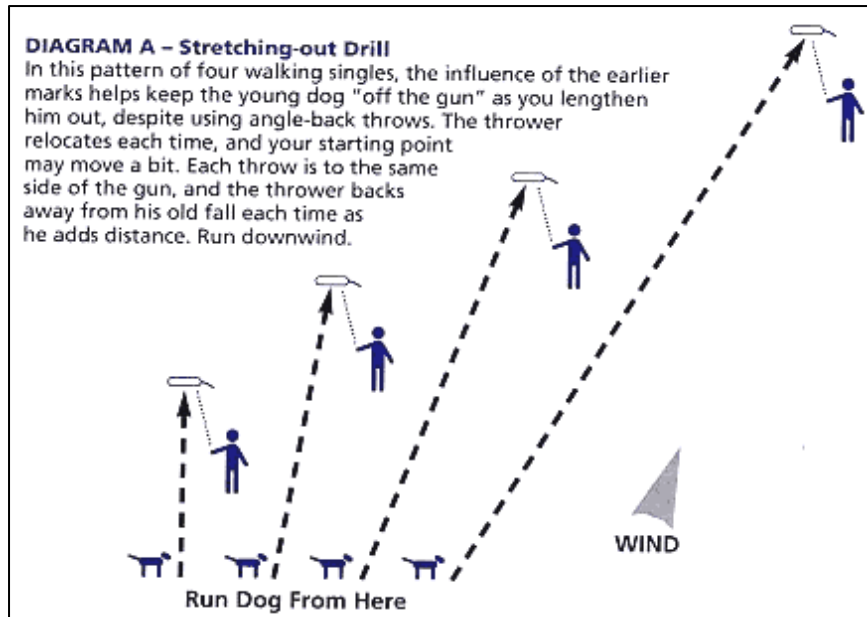
In our last two columns we established methods of teaching the dog to run toward the fall instead of toward the thrower. Diagram A shows a technique to maintain that habit when you first start lengthening a pup's marks. In this throwing pattern, the influences combine to keep the pup off the thrower, despite the fact that he is now running farther than he's used to going.

Teaching the Dog Where to Slow Down

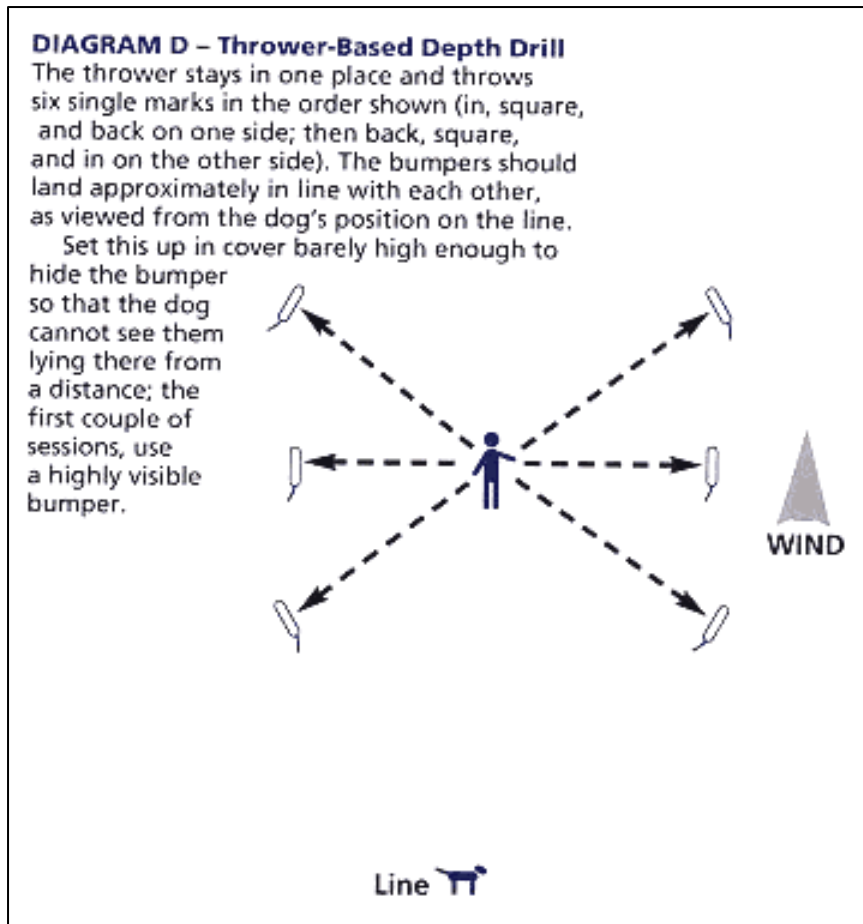
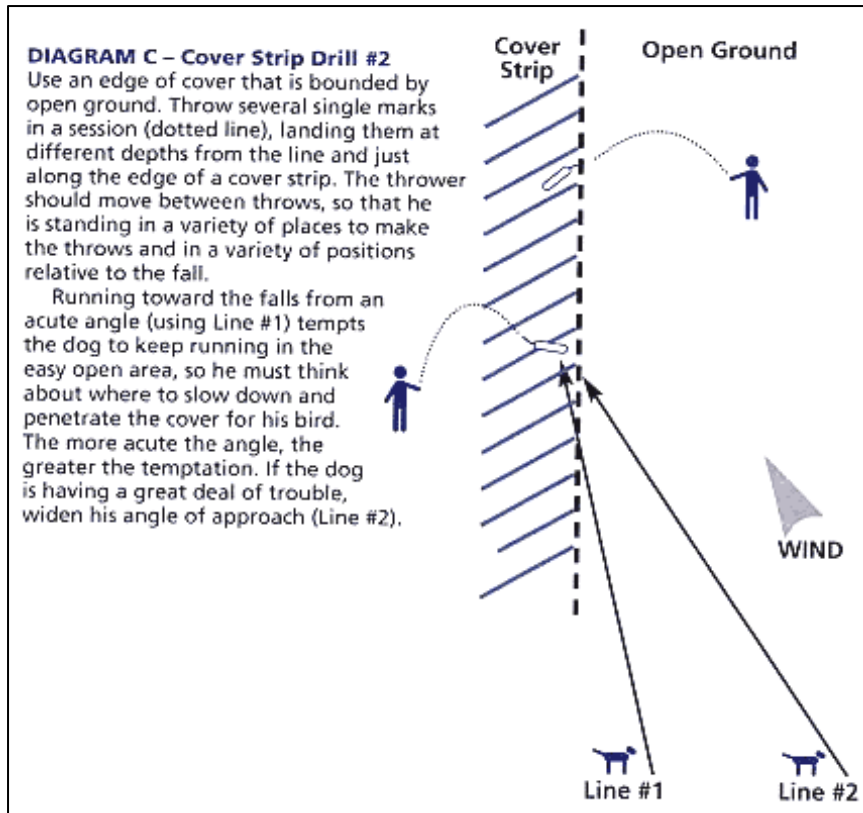
Overrunning marks is a common mistake of enthusiastic young dogs. Often this happens not because the dog actually mismarks where the bird fell, but because in his exuberance he's not concentrating on slowing down. If his marking was started as we described in our last two articles, with emphasis on teaching the dog to mark a "spot on the ground," then a lot of the work to teach the "slow down and look for it" idea will have been done.

Here are several additional techniques for teaching a young dog to gauge the depth of marks.

- ◆ **Patch Marks.** Throw single marks into patches of cover that are surrounded by open ground.
- ◆ **Downhill Marking Drill.** Run the dog downhill to marks that are thrown in a flat area beyond the base of the hill. Throw a succession of single marks, each somewhat shorter than the last. The need to control his own momentum--momentum that is created by the steep downhill start--will teach him to think about depth
- ◆ **Marking Drill.** Set up five throwing stations in long and short positions. We like to place them at the points of an imaginary "W." Run five singles, alternating between long and short throwers. To add an additional "think about it!" element, have some marks thrown angle back, and some "square". (If you can't get five throwers together, you can set out five chairs and have one thrower walk among them, but five people in the field at one time will make this drill more effective.)
- ◆ **Cover Strip Marking Drills.** Throw to the edge of cover. There are two different ways to use a cover strip for this purpose. They are shown in Diagrams B and C.
- ◆ **Thrower-Based Depth Drills.** For dogs with consistent "overrunning" problems, there are several drills that teach the dog to rely on the position of the thrower as a cue to slow down and start looking for the bird. We show one of these in Diagram D.



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What to do if the Dog Fails? Help or Handle?

Much of the benefit of these types of drills comes from letting the dog figure it out on his own. However, if his hunt is so far out of the area that it is going to be unproductive, or if he may overheat from too much hunting, then he needs help. Also, if the youngster starts to return to a place where he previously found a bird during the drill, the thrower should immediately attract him away from it and back into the area of the new fall.

We generally prefer to have the young dog helped by the thrower, rather than handled to the bird. A good thrower knows how to give the dog the least amount of help required to get him to hunt the correct area without the dog realizing he's being helped. This prevents the dog from expecting the thrower to "bail him out."

How much thrower activity is needed to help a dog hunt productively varies with the dog's temperament, with the nature of his error, and with his prior experience at being helped. Some techniques the thrower can use to help a "lost" dog include the following:

1. Standing up to create a visual attraction.
2. Making a sound attraction.
3. Taking a few steps toward the bird while the dog is watching.
4. Moving relative to the bird while the dog is NOT watching, so as to influence the dog's hunt more toward the bird's location.

Repeating Marks?

We think that it is rarely beneficial to repeat the type of marks that are used to help a dog learn pure marking (as opposed to marking "concepts" that really present lining issues). Instead of repeating the exact marks thrown in the above drills, set up the same drill in a different location and your dog will get more out of it.