

Teaching a Dog to Mark – Part II More Training for “Spot on the Ground”

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In our last article, we talked about starting a young dog's marking. We discussed how to encourage the dog to use his eyes when watching and recovering marks, and how to establish the pup's belief that a fall consists of a "spot on the ground."

This article continues our discussion of developing marking skills in a young retriever.



One way to teach the dog to look at the end of the trajectory is to place the thrower so as to downplay, but not eliminate him from the dog's view. A bush in front of the thrower and/or an open space between the thrower and the fall are examples of how this can be done.

Concentrating on the End of the Trajectory

When a dog watches a mark thrown, he receives several visual cues. These cues form a "picture" that means "there's now something to be retrieved."

In a typical marking situation, the first cue is the sight of the thrower. The second is an attraction sound like gunshot, duck call or "hey, hey." The third is the thrower's arm motion followed by bird or bumper motion. The fourth cue is the motion of the trajectory. The final cue is the sight of the bird or bumper landing on the ground at the end of its arc. The dog can also receive verbal or body language cues from his handler that help him understand what is about to happen.

With experience, the young dog comes to associate this collection of cues with the idea that there's something to retrieve. You want the dog to understand that the "something to retrieve" is located at the *end* of the trajectory, not at the start of the throw. This understanding helps him go directly to the fall.

Remember that the *end* of the throw's trajectory is the smallest visual part of the total picture. The thrower standing there is a lot bigger, and the sight of the throw in the sky is often bigger, too. It's pretty easy for a young dog to learn that, instead of running straight toward the end of the trajectory, he can just run to the general area where he saw the thrower standing and start hunting around. He also might learn to run at the *apex* of the trajectory of the throw, and develop a hunt from there.

This behavior may produce a good "area marker," whereas the dog that associates a mark with an actual spot on the ground and runs toward the end of the trajectory has a good chance of becoming a "pinpoint marker." All other things being equal, the dog that runs to the "spot" at the end of the trajectory will be a more efficient marker. And if there's anything unusual or unexpected about the mark (discussed below), these are the dogs most likely to succeed.

"There's something funny about this mark..."

Any time you try to take some of the marking cues away, you'll realize that a retriever's marking is dependent on several cues being present. For example, if your dog is used to hand thrown marks and you start to train with a mechanical launcher, he may have trouble interpreting what he sees as a "throw" because it isn't preceded by any swinging arm motion.

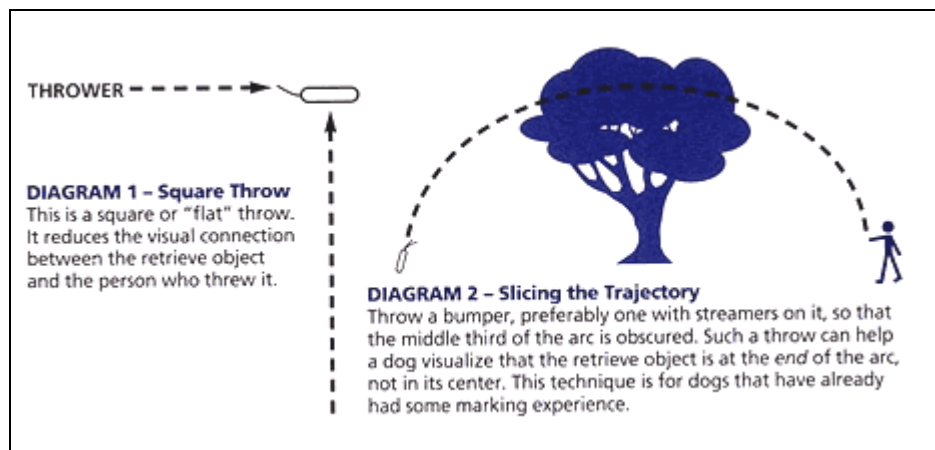
You can get a similar "huh??" response from a dog the first time you mark him without any sound attraction, or the first time you mark him with "hidden guns" (no thrower is ever visible). With some dogs, you can even get the "huh??" response if you suddenly ask them to mark from a remote location rather than from the heel position. This change makes things "just different enough" that they can't interpret the data as well as they normally do.

An often encountered — and major — change in the "picture" occurs when you introduce a manual sling shot type of "winger" that puts the fall a very long way from its point of origin. Such a throw especially used as a memory bird, reveals that dogs often orient off the point of origin of the throw and not the landing place. Despite the fact that the distance a winger throws is three or more times the distance a person can throw, these dogs will start to hunt at their "standard distance" from the point of origin of the throw. The *origin* of the throw tells these dogs where to expect to find the landing place.

You will also see the same kind of behavior with an extra long flier. Instead of going to where the shot bird fell, the dog goes to "typical throwing distance" and starts hunting there.

Training the Dog to Look at the End of the Trajectory

Generally speaking, the dogs that understand to mark a *spot on the ground* located at the *end* of the trajectory seem to adapt more readily than the "area markers" when you alter some of the cues that are familiar to them. Also remember that any deviation from what a dog expects to see (such as launcher throws, wingers, hidden guns, remote marking and so on) is best introduced as a single mark, not part of a multiple set-up. This gives the dog the best opportunity to concentrate fully on the new situation.



Here are some techniques to help a dog understand to go to the end of the trajectory:

- ◆ Throw very desirable objects, such as lively wing-clipped pigeons.
- ◆ Throw very visible objects, such as bumpers with black and white streamers that help the dog focus on the object as it lands. Throwing into water so that the object lands with a splash will also enhance the end of the trajectory.
- ◆ Use long throws, particularly ones thrown square, and place the thrower so as to downplay (but not eliminate) his visibility once the dog is sent.
- ◆ Shoot long fliers, where the bird is "ridden out" by the gunners.

Slice the trajectory into two parts (see Diagram A). With this technique — which is for more advanced pups, not beginners — you intentionally set up the mark so that the apex of the throw is obscured, and only the first and last thirds of it can be seen. Streamers on your bumpers are useful here.

Throw "Walk-away singles," another technique for more advanced pups. In this procedure, you have your thrower walk away from his position as soon as the bird or bumper is on the ground. With practice, the dog learns to concentrate on the end of the trajectory, and not be drawn off target as the thrower walks away. Begin in light cover with large white bumpers, and then go to large black ones that are visible above the cover. Progress to more difficult situations as the dog learns to concentrate on the fall itself.