

# Transition to Cold Blinds

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The transition from handling drills in the yard to cold blinds in the field can be one of the most difficult training transitions for retrievers. The drills we describe in this column will help your dog through that transition.

A "cold blind," for those unfamiliar with the term, means that the dog has no idea of where the bird is — he didn't see it fall, its location is not part of a "pattern" he recognizes, nor is it at a location he's been to before (a "permanent" blind).

To run good cold blinds, a dog needs a well-honed set of skills in the areas of stopping, casting and holding lines; an acceptance of control; and an attitude of trust and confidence.

A very common mistake for beginning retriever trainers is to try to jump too quickly into cold blinds after the basic casting drills (T patterns) are mastered. A dog's trust, confidence and momentum can be damaged this way. Also, control can be lost.

## Preparation for transition drills

To recap where we've been, after completing the dog's basic obedience and collar conditioning, we gave him the following foundation on handling in the yard: Heel alignment drill, four-bumper wagon wheel; push-pull drill; eight-bumper staggered wagon wheel; Over and Back casts; come-in whistle; baseball; stopping to the whistle; single T on land; modified double T on land; obstacles on land; single T in water; and, finally, the channel picture in water, done both as a cheating mark and a blind.

You may be following a different program with your dog or combining programs from a variety of sources. Regardless of the program(s) you use, you can utilize the type of drills in this column as transition drills, provided your dog can stop and cast at the distances required, and provided he recognizes that a white flag means "bumper pile."

## Transition Field Drills

We use several drills, *done in the field*, to help a dog through the transition to cold blinds. These field drills consists of:

- ◆ Long permanent blinds
- ◆ "Go as sent" flag drills
- ◆ "Three-in-a-row no-squaring" drills
- ◆ "Chair" drills

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For dogs that are having momentum problems, we also add:

- ◆ "Pop-up" blinds, using a bird launcher
- ◆ "Swim to the other shore" blinds, with a "salted" landing area.
- ◆

These drills get the dog accustomed to being handled in new locations and at increasing distances. They also teach concepts that help him interpret casts in field situations.

**Correcting the dog.** In general, you would not use the e-collar with a beginner in these drills, except for whistle refusals, and only, of course, if the dog had previously been trained to understand this type of correction.

If you get persistent cast refusals ("cast refusal" means that the dog goes in the wrong direction, or not at all, in response to the cast) you should walk out closer to the dog to cast, and next time set the drills up shorter so that control can be maintained.

With a more advanced dog, in the case of a flagrant cast refusal, you can use the e-collar to reinforce an immediate Sit whistle given right after the dog starts the wrong way. Then pause, and cast again.

Don't assume that you're getting a "cast refusal" just because you don't like where the dog is going. When you are handling in the field rather than in the yard, there are a lot of things that influence a dog, resulting in less precision in his casts. If he *thinks* he's done it right, and you correct him, his confidence will severely erode, and you can get popping, bugging and no-goes. Also, analyze the weakness if it's showing up repeatedly. You might want to go back and review one of the preparatory drills listed at the start of this column.

**Permanent Blinds.** A "permanent blind" is a blind placed at a location the dog has been to before, either earlier in that training session, or on a different day. The permanent blind has two functions.

First, it conditions a dog to run long distances without popping. Your goal should be to develop permanent blinds of up to twice the length of the cold blinds that your young dog will be running.

Second, the permanent blind is used to help teach a dog not to succumb to "contrary conditions," (environmental influences that cause the dog to drift off-line — such as side hills and cross winds).

Teach a permanent blind in segments, starting with a segment closest to a pile of bumpers, and moving farther away with each repetition. The length of the segments should not exceed the dog's ability to hold a straight course.

Develop the permanent blind to full length over several training sessions. Once it is taught, come back to the permanent blind on different days and run it in different wind conditions.

**Dealing with problems.** In general, you should handle the dog to keep him on the line to the blind. However, your goal with a permanent blind is to encourage the dog to hold a straight line.

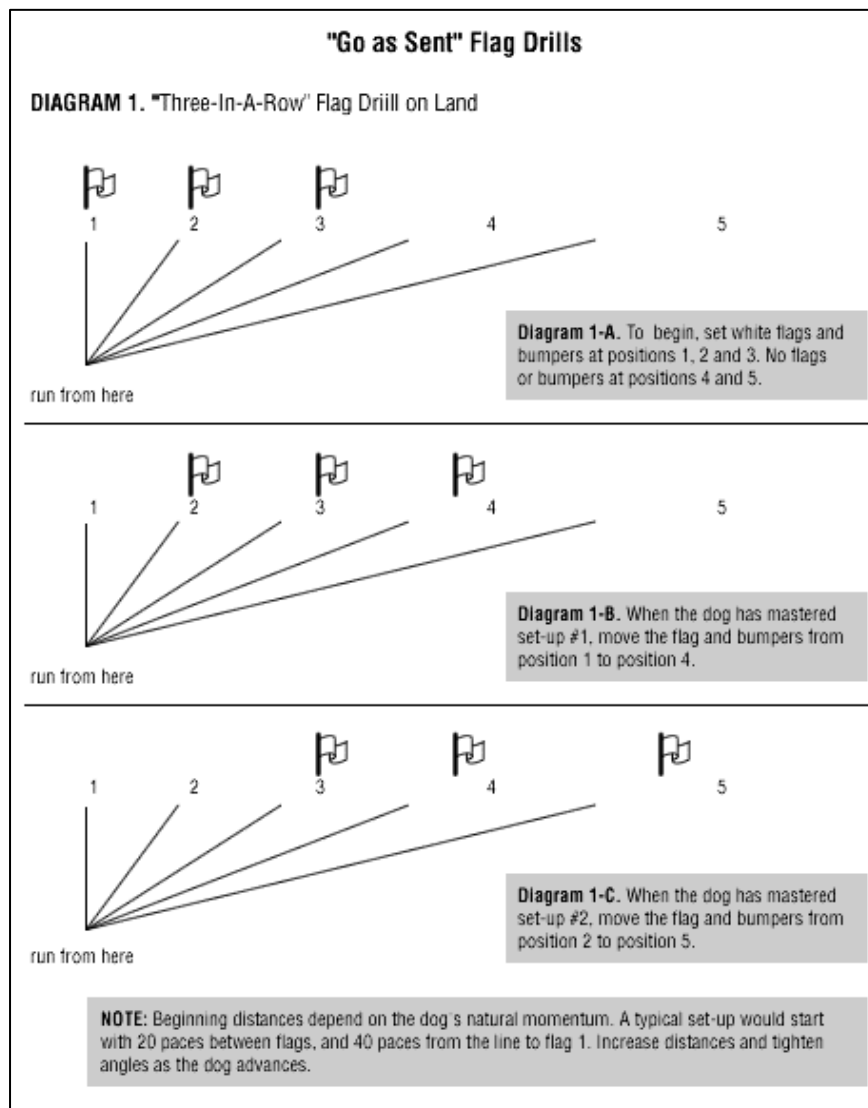
## Transition to Cold Blinds

To prevent a "banana" from becoming part of your permanent blind, you can place pairs of visible stakes in locations along the line to the blind, so that the dog will go between the stakes if he holds a good line. When the dog is reliable at holding his line, remove the stakes.

These stakes act as a visual guide for the dog and are especially useful to counter fading off the line due to a crosswind. They cause the dog to make his own decision to hold the line. If you simply handle him to stay on line, his acceptance of your handling put him back on line. The stake technique causes the *dog* to make a conscious choice to stay on the line. This subtle difference amounts to a lot when your goal is to teach the dog to make the decision to hold the line.

## "Go as sent" flag drills

**"Three-in-a-row."** Start this drill in an open field without any significant influences to throw the dog off line. Place one bumper at each of three flags, in positions 1, 2 and 3 as shown in Diagram 1-A, and run the three lines.



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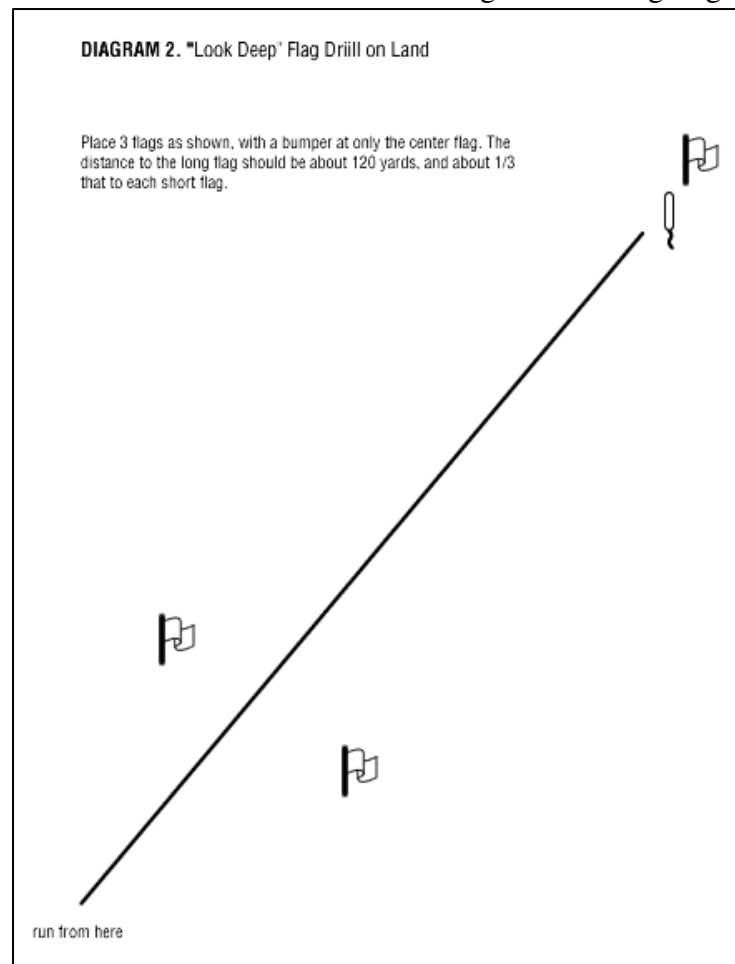
When the dog can run the three lines without needing to be handled, move the first flag from position 1 to position 4 as shown in Diagram 1-B, and run the drill from your original starting point. Handle the dog to keep him on line. When the dog can run *these* three lines without handling, move the flag from position 2 to position 5, as shown in Diagram 1-C, and repeat again from the *original* starting point.

In different sessions, set the drill up in different places, so that the locations do *not* become "permanent blinds" to the dog. Sometimes set up the drill so that you are advancing from right to left, instead of left to right.

**Dealing with problems.** If you have to handle extensively on one of the lines, walk out part way so that you can be closer to the dog to handle. If you have to handle more than once or twice to get all of the lines, then your dog needs the drill set up shorter and wider, so that he can be successful. Once successful, run it from the original starting point.

**"Look deep" flag drill.** This drill teaches the dog to look out in the field between, and past, two other flags that are closer, and therefore more inviting than the deep one. Set the "Look deep" drill in a new place each time.

Set up the flags as shown in Diagram 2, with one bumper at the deep flag, and none at the short flags. If the dog is unable to focus on the long, center flag from your original starting point, move up until he can do so. Don't send him when he's looking at the wrong flag.

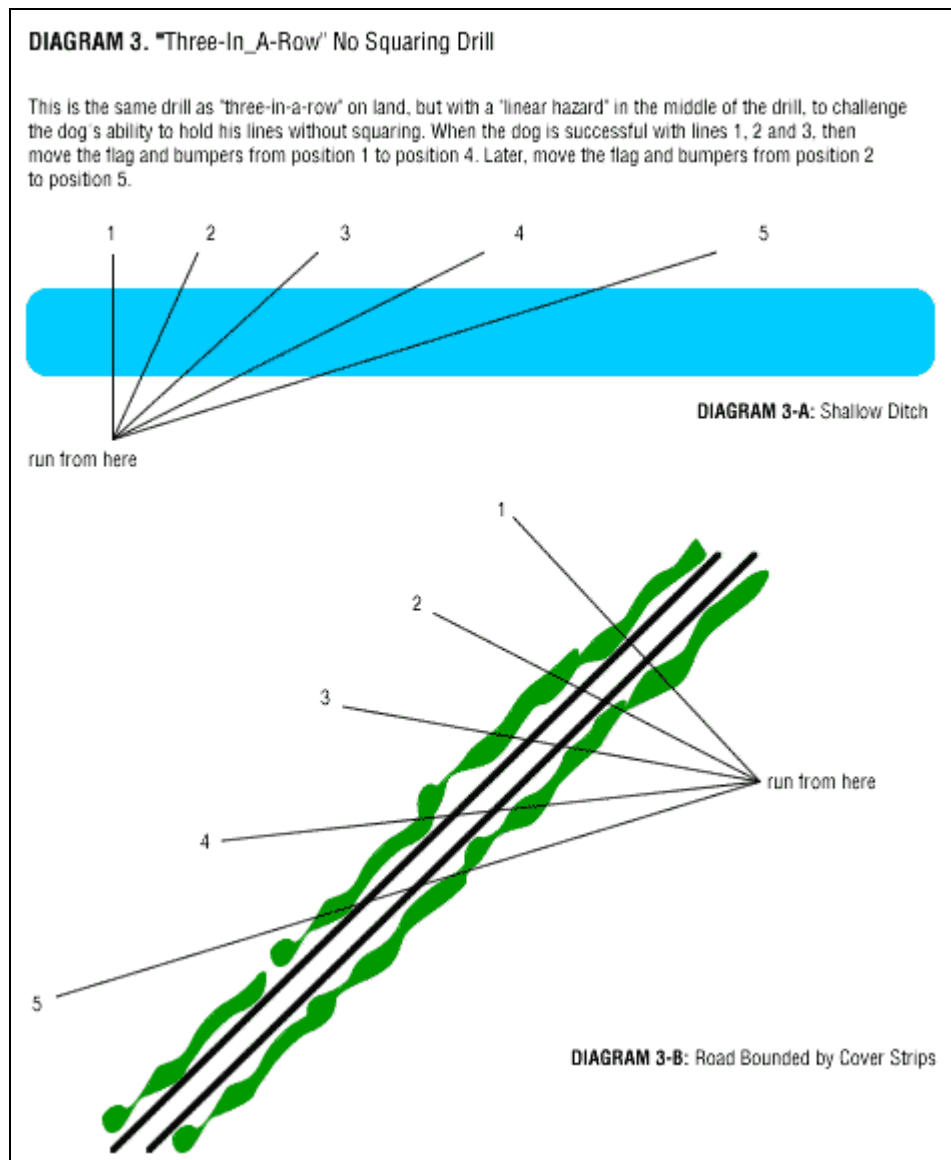


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**Dealing with problems.** If the dog is focusing on the long flag when you send him, but *immediately* heads for a short one after you send him, stop him with NO and call him back. Move up a little and try again to get the line to the long flag. If he starts out on a good line for the long flag, *then deviates* to a shorter one, stop him with your sit whistle and handle him back to the long one.

### "Three-in-a-row no squaring" drill

This drill is set up like the basic three-in-a-row drill, above, but now with a "linear hazard" between your starting point and the flags. (Shown in Diagrams 3-A and 3-B.) Now not only do the shorter flags and old locations influence the dog off line, but so does the presence of the hazard, itself. (The hazard can be things such as a wide shallow ditch, or a road with cover along its sides.)



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This type of hazard influences *all* dogs — from Junior Hunters to National Field Champions. They all want to "square" the hazard, and deviate off line.

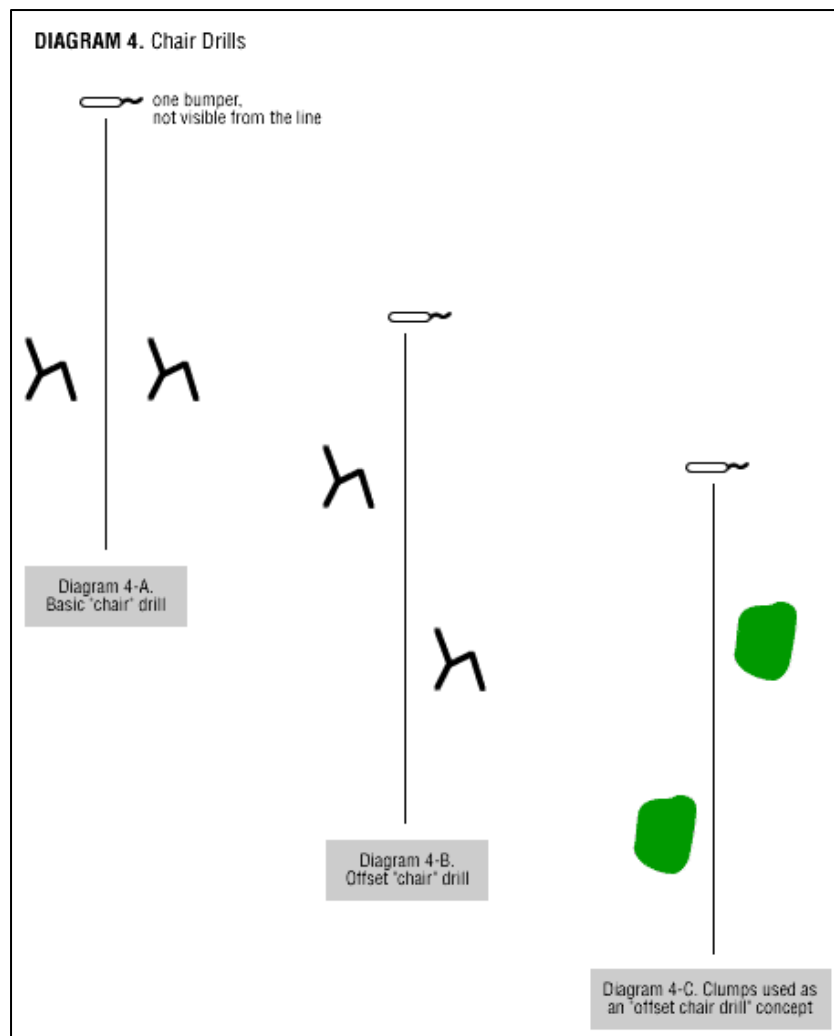
Handle to keep the dog on line to overcome squaring tendencies. Learn to recognize a good effort to resist the influence of the hazard, and don't expect geometric perfection from a young dog.

Be creative and find new "linear hazards" for this type drill as quickly as your dog can master them. Be sure you set up the drill in both directions so that your dog learns to resist both squaring to the left and squaring to the right. Also, set it up in different wind conditions.

Chair drills — the transition away from flags

Up to now, we've used visible flags to mark the destinations, while we presented increasingly challenging situations to teach the dog to handle and hold lines. Now it is time to eliminate the use of visible prompts at the destination.

Place two chairs about five yards apart, so that if the dog takes a line between the chairs, he arrives at a blind that is *not* marked with a flag. See Diagram 4-A. Handle to keep him on line between the chairs. If he is having difficulty, move up to simplify.



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Set the chair drill up in a different place each time you run it. This is not a permanent blind situation. Work on this drill until the dog can spot the "channel" between the chairs and take an initial line between them without needing to be handled. Then offset the chairs, as shown in Diagram 4-B.

When the dog can spot the corridor between the chairs and give you a good line through it, try finding other visible things to be your "chairs" such as two bushes, two tule clumps, etc., as shown in Diagram 4-C.

## Beginning cold blinds

When to start true cold blinds depends on the dog's natural momentum. Dogs with more momentum can start sooner. Dogs with little natural momentum should spend more time on the sort of transitional pattern blinds described in this column.

Until your dog has had some "diversion" practice (a subject of a future column), you should not set cold blinds where they are in any way influenced by old marks.

Review our comments on "correcting the dog" in the first part of this column. In general, when beginning cold blinds, you should move up if you need to regain control, rather than use the e-collar.

For dogs who need more momentum...

When you do start cold blinds, you may see your dog lose a lot of momentum. If so, here are two more confidence-builders.

**"Pop up" cold blinds.** A "pop up" blind is a bird that is thrown in the air from a hidden location when the dog is about 7/8 of the way out to the blind. Dogs find a wing-clipped bird suddenly popping up to be especially exciting. Doing a number of "pop up blinds" can build confidence and momentum. A remotely activated bird launcher is very useful when running pop-up blinds. Note: You should not use this method if your dog is trained to sit to flush, because the "picture" of a bird suddenly coming up will mean "Sit" to the dog.

**"Swim-to-the-other-shore" cold blinds.** This type of blind involves a short swim squarely across a piece of water. The picture to the dog is "go to the far shore and I'll find a bumper." To prevent the dog from hunting the far shore, salt the likely "landing stretch" of the far shore with several white bumpers, so that the dog will immediately spot one when he gets out of the water.