

When the "Go bird" is a "Punch bird"

By Jim & Phyllis Dobbs and Alice Woodyard

"Punch bird" is field trial jargon for a mark that is longer — often significantly longer — than the other marks that are part of a multiple marking test. Retired or hidden guns may make remembering that long bird more difficult. The dog will also be influenced by many hazards — such as difficult terrain and old falls — that break down his momentum and sidetrack him on the way to the retrieve.

A typical way that a "punch bird" is used in a multiple marking test is as the memory bird. The skills needed by field trial dogs to succeed at this type of test are well understood by experienced retriever trainers, and, therefore, well understood by seasoned retrievers.

But when the "punch bird" is the *last* bird down (the "go bird"), rather than one of the memory birds, you often see a different result. A surprisingly high percentage of dogs — even highly trained dogs — will need to be handled in order to get the punch bird.

Part of the reason for this is the novelty factor: Retrievers don't see this test a lot, whereas they frequently see tests involving "punch birds" as memory birds.

We think there are additional reasons too for the poorer results you see when the long bird is the last bird down. For example, in the traditional order of the falls where the "punch bird" is a *memory* bird, the dog is aided in holding his line to the long bird by that well-drilled concept: "Don't go back to an old fall." This is a concept that, as we all know, quickly becomes second nature to well-trained retrievers. A dog doesn't have this crutch ("beware the old fall") to lean on when the long bird is picked up *before* the shorter birds.

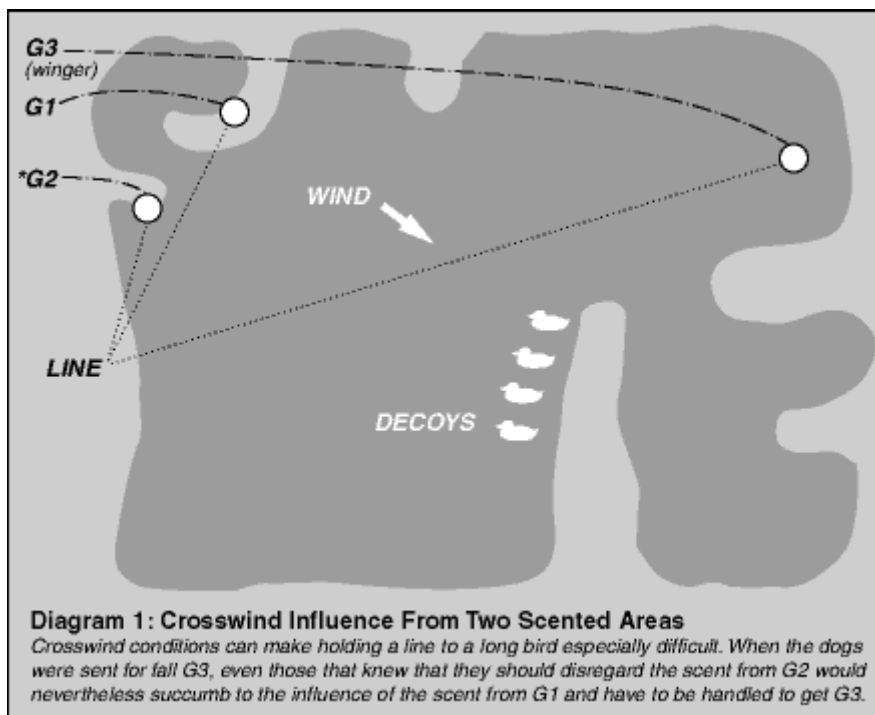
Also, when going for a long memory bird, the trained retriever is often working in "line holding mode," because this is the way he has been taught to run memory birds. This is especially the case if the memory bird is a difficult one, and the handler "gives a line" to the dog before sending him. This pre-launch ceremony helps remind the trained dog to resist influences that would pull him off line. On the other hand, when he's simply sent to get the last bird down, he doesn't have all that lining training working in his favor.

The "punch-bird-as-go-bird" configuration is seen with increasing frequency in hunt tests. It matches up with a realistic hunting scenario where a flock comes toward the hunter, then, alarmed by the first shot, swings away, and birds are dropped at ever increasing distances from the line.

The challenge of this type of test is made even more severe when the wind conditions are such that the dog winds the shorter birds on his way to the longer one. This is a situation that really tests the marking skills of even the savviest, most experienced retriever.

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We set this type of test recently at a seminar. (See Diagram No. 1.) Even the well-trained dogs that clearly marked all three falls and weren't adversely affected by the complex shoreline had difficulty completing the test without handling. The major factor that the dogs weren't prepared for was the influence of scent coming from the # 1 fall as they swam for the # 3 bird. Experienced dogs were able to resist the influence of the scent from the # 2 fall, but after clearing that hazard, they would succumb to the scent from the # 1 fall, and deviate from their line.



What to Train on

What can you do in training to help a dog be successful at completing this kind of set-up? Here are some ideas.

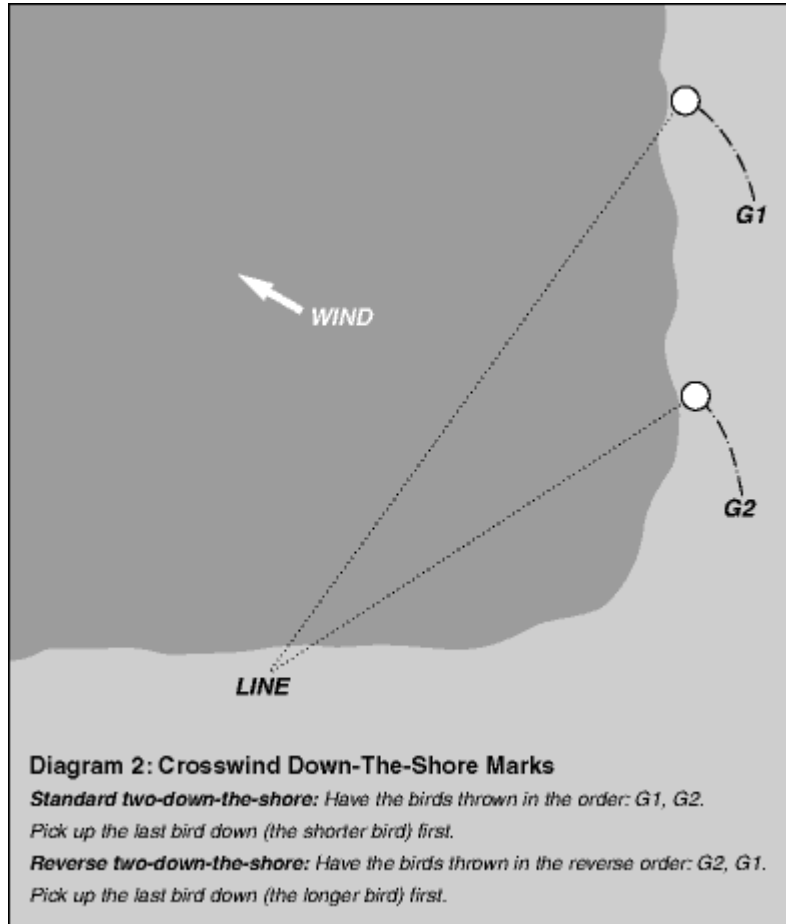
First of all, review a concept water blind, such as the channel picture, but set in a crosswind. Then add the influence of swimming past two separate scented areas. The familiar channel picture will help the dog succeed, and make it seem more "logical" to him when he is asked to commit that most unnatural of acts for a dog: namely, *not* to honor his nose.

Although training a dog not to honor his nose at certain times is an admittedly "unnatural act," it has a practical hunting application. If the last bird you drop is a cripple and it is trying to swim away, you may want your dog to be able to swim past any shorter birds that are dead to catch the cripple. The more quickly the dog can get to the cripple, the more likely he is to be able to recover it.

A second concept to practice that will strengthen any dog's line-holding skills in water is the familiar "two-down-the-shore" set of marks. But now add a cross wind coming off the shore, blowing the scent of the short gun station and the old fall to the dog as he swims for the longer mark.

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Finally, reverse the order of the falls in the two-down-the-shore test, so that the long bird is the last bird down, and the one retrieved first. Done this way, particularly with an offshore cross wind, you will strengthen a dog's ability to hold the line he initially commits to, despite the influence of scented areas. See Diagram No. 2.



How to Correct? Be Conservative

Any time you ask a dog *not* to honor his nose in a training set-up, you have a sensitive situation where overcorrecting the inexperienced dog can lead to blinking. Therefore, when you first start teaching a dog to ignore scented areas, establish the scented areas close enough to you so that you can easily influence the dog. Gradually increase distance as the dog learns what you want.

We recommend that you be wary of using e-collar corrections too soon. It is usually better, when handling an inexperienced dog off of scent, simply to handle *many* times to keep the dog out of the scented area, rather than make physical corrections for "cast refusals." Set up your first crosswind tests with plenty of "room" in them, so that you have time to keep the dog from getting to the scented area. After the dog has had several experiences with being handled away from scent, you can correct for cast refusals as you normally would.

"Primary Selection" — Is it the Answer?

When running a test, in which the longest bird is the last bird down, one way to "defeat" some of the influences on a hunt or field trial dog is *not* to pick the long bird up first. Rather, get the shorter birds first, and leave the "punch bird" as the final bird to be retrieved.

Your dog might be willing — or even prefer — to pick the birds up in this order in a particular test, depending on all the influences. If so, you might want to take advantage of his preference. But should you go out and *train* him to do the test this way?

Doing the test this way calls for a trained skill known as "primary selection." Primary selection means that the handler decides which bird the dog will pick up first, rather than going with what dogs typically want to do—which is to get the last bird down first.

Primary selection is one of those things that seems easy to do in theory, but turns out to be far from easy in practice. Occasionally, a particular dog will be amenable to being run this way, but most are not. Why? Well, there are several reasons, and we'll review a few of them here.

First of all, getting a dog to be *reliable* at primary selection, particularly where the last bird down is an exciting flier pheasant or duck, can require training methods that most dogs do not handle well. Remember, if your training methods have to "fight nature" so thoroughly that you "take all the nature out of the dog," you won't have much of a performer left.

Second, primary selection removes the excitement of the "prey chase" (going for the bird immediately after it hits the ground). Most dogs do not do well with a steady diet of tests that lack excitement. What's more, since the dogs eventually become conditioned not to expect to "go" on any particular bird, some dogs tend not to stay visually locked on each fall with the intensity that makes for the best marking.

Over the years, more than one notable professional trainer has given "primary selection" a try and eventually abandoned it. So, although primary selection seems "very logical" to us humans, it isn't a panacea the retriever trainer can typically rely on.