

Training Newsletter
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Marking

Part I: Conditioning for Concentration

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Among the most valued skills of a retriever is its ability to effectively mark fallen game. Waterfowlers want a dog that continuously scans the sky for birds, marks the location of downed game, drives out enthusiastically straight to the fall area on command, hunts the area closely, and quickly returns an undamaged bird directly to the handler.

A retriever's marking ability can be greatly enhanced by addressing the individual component skills necessary for effective marking. These skills include:

concentration/focus	negotiating obstacles
steadiness	lining
memory	nose/hunting cover
distance estimation	ignoring diversions

Future articles will address each of these factors and their influences on marking. These skills are also necessary for running accurate blinds. Remember that marking exercises should play a very small part in the early stages of training a retriever. Marking drills are used only intermittently in a variety of locations and environments throughout the Wildrose basic retriever curriculum. The ability to mark is a natural instinct among quality retrievers. All the trainer has to do is enhance the gifts proper genetics has provided. Dogs with weaker natural skills can benefit from properly formatted marking exercises. Place more emphasis in early training experiences on memories, steadiness, and handling skills.

Excessive marking can promote unsteadiness with the excitable pup, and often results in a "self-employed dog," a dog overconfident in getting the job done on its own. Handling and memory exercises, on the other hand, promote interdependence between the handler and the dog. The young dog will rely to some extent on the handler, thereby remaining both under control and confident, a much more cooperative relationship. Periodic, meaningful marking activities will not interfere with this relationship as long as the dog is kept calm and marking is not overdone in each session. NEVER NEEDLESSLY OVEREXCITE a pup with repetitive, meaningless marks unless the pup has a motivational problem.

Concentration

Concentration/Focus

The tendency to focus, seemingly scrutinizing the situation, often appears in a potentially talented pup quite young. The pup locks onto the owner's gaze, looking directly into his

or her face. This is a most desirable trait and among the best indicators of a compliant nature.

Often standards for focusing on the handler or activities in the field are not properly established and maintained in training. The indicators of lack of focus can be varied: Eye contact prior to command is not established consistently. Half-hearted responses to command are tolerated, even rewarded. Dogs fidget, move about, or smell the ground, totally disinterested in events while at sit. Pups give up early on the quest for the dummy. Memory bumpers are forgotten quickly. The dog is disrupted on the retrieve by activities, meaningless objects, or scent. Head swinging occurs while the handler is attempting a cast. Unfortunately this list could be even more extensive.

To develop a great marker, or a dog that lines and handles well, the dog must possess the ability to concentrate and focus its attention patiently, sometimes for extended periods. In situations where the dog is older and well beyond basic training, yet lacks concentration in the field, it will be necessary to regress to the basics of obedience to reinstitute the principles that promote focus. Hopefully, this experience will also re-establish an interdependence of cooperation and teamwork between the handler and the dog.

For the young pup, begin by establishing focus from the very first training exercises. In either circumstance, old dog or new pup, the key is eye contact.

Enhancing Focus

To develop concentration in a dog, begin with the basics during the obedience training. Condition the pup to make eye contact before any command is given. Gain the pup's attention by calling his name or giving a short peep on the whistle. As the pup makes eye contact, hold the gaze briefly, then give the command. Make sure the pup is absolutely still and focused, awaiting the command. This process is best begun at heel. Call the name, hold the eye contact briefly, then give the command, "heel," and step off.

A similar exercise is to have the pup remain at sit. Attempt to hold eye contact as you walk completely around the pup. Repeat the "sit" command or whistle as you keep your hand extended upward signaling sit. If encouragement is initially needed, walk about spinning a bumper occasionally or displaying a treat. This will assist in maintaining eye contact. Gain and briefly hold eye contact on recall drills and handling exercises. Detached eye contact during these exercises usually denotes lack of concentration or even avoidance.

Holding Focus

All early lessons for your pups should be short. Once a pup's interest wanes, so does concentration. Similarly boring, repetitive drills provide little interesting stimulation for the intelligent, talented dog. Overuse of maintenance drills such as lining to piles, simple baseball, or short marks can result in a disinterested student. Change training locations, vary session topics, incorporate obstacles, or work in groups to keep the dog's interest keen, and maintain eye contact when applicable.

To hold the attention of the young student, always teach new skills in an area free of distractions. Training with other dogs present is extremely effective but only after skills are established and understood. The pup's attention and eyes must be on you or focused on the field.

Avoid interruptions and interference during sessions such as cell phone calls or chatting with friends. The handler must remain focused on the dog to maintain communication. A dog will quickly recognize that its partner is not paying attention, and the pup's concentration will diminish.

Another strategy to enhance focus is to establish a delay period after a command/response sequence. Allow a short period to pass after the dog responds correctly to a command where nothing occurs, a quiet moment for the dog to reflect on the command/response sequence—time to think about it. Example—command, “sit,”—response—delay—next command. This strategy is especially effective on stop to the whistle during handling exercises prior to the cast.

The “Watch” Cue

A method to reestablish concentration in the field after a period of idleness is to condition the retriever to the command, “watch.” Begin by verbally instructing, “watch,” very quietly as the thrower prepares to provide the mark(s) in training. Also, repeat the command as you walk out to place sight memories. If done consistently, the dog will learn to focus attention on the field or sky in anticipation.

Concentration can be enhanced in all working retrievers through conditioning exercises. The next part of our series will address how focus extension and steadiness complement one another to enhance marking ability.