

Marking Enhancement
Part II: Concentration

Concentration/Focus

The tendency to focus, seemingly scrutinizing the situation, often appears in a potentially talented pup quite young as a product of genetics. The pup locks onto the owner's gaze, looking directly into their faces. This is a most desirable trait and among the best indicators of a biddable nature.

In training, often standards for focusing on the handler or activities in the field are not properly established and maintained. 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 for that matter a dog that lines and handles well, the dog must possess the ability to concentrate and focus their 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 which promote focus. Hopefully, this experience will also re-establish an interdependence of cooperation and teamwork between the handler and the dog.

As 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. With the pup, 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 in duration. Once a pup's interest wanes, so does concentration. Similarly boring repetitive drills provide little interesting stimulation for the intelligent, talented dog. Over use 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.

Always teach new skills in an area free of distractions in order to hold the attention of the young student. 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 their 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 allowing 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.