



## ASK THE PRO

### developing marking in the young dog

By Clint Avant

YOU HAVE BOUGHT A NICE PUPPY, researched pedigrees and raised him to 6 months old. He is fun, outgoing and confident. Beyond initial puppy marks, there is a long road ahead of the pup to get him to his first Derby or Hunting Test. Here are some pointers to think about for pups 6 months old and over.

#### 1. Basics

During this period of the pup's life, he is experiencing some stress. Force fetching, forcing to the pile and all the new skills that yard work entails is a new phenomenon for the little guy. While the dog may not be experiencing any physical pressure (force) on any given day, it is likely all causing mental pressure in some way, shape or form.

Every puppy should, if possible, have a yard work session every day along with a field session. I understand that this is not always possible with the Amateur trainer, but remember to keep his work balanced. It cannot be all work and no play for the puppy and the fieldwork can

relieve the pup of some of the pressure he is experiencing in the yard.

A lack of good *Basics* can really affect a young dog's marking. Problems with the retrieve, the delivery and manners on line that you may have experienced with your puppy should all start to iron out when going through a systemic *Yard* program.

#### 2. Focus

Focus with a puppy can begin to happen before a breeding even takes place! An idea in the breeder's mind, on paper, can lead to puppies with intense desire and focus. Lack of focus and desire can also lead to difficulties in advancing your young dog's marking. So buying a puppy from the best breeding you can afford is always a good start.

A young dog is a product of their environment, so start puppy marks early. The mechanics of the retrieve involve a puppy picking out the gunner, going out for the retrieve, making the retrieve and returning to you. Any deviation in any of these foundational requirements will

create problems down the road, so work on any problems with his mechanics early!

A young dog can't be focused if he's lacking in obedience. A wild and crazy little puppy on line may be cute at first, but it will not be very cute when he is 6 months old and 60 pounds. Start insisting on obedience with your little one early on the line. I'm not asking that the pup be steadied early, just that the pup not be thrashing around and screaming while a mark is being thrown under moderate restraint. It is very difficult to focus and mark the bird if a young dog is not watching it.

Developing confidence as a young dog starts *Basics* training is also imperative to creating the intense focus that we desire in any level of dog. We teach these young dogs through shorter marks and it is here they learn the destination of their retrieve. By destination, I am talking about where the bird landed, regardless of the relation to the thrower. By throwing shorter marks (starting with no cover for a little pup and gradually increasing cover) a dog will develop his ability to mark his destination of the bird more easily. 50 short marks for a young dog are better than any 300 yard marks where all the young dog learns is to run at the gun and hunt around for a bird in random places. We are seeking intense focus on the destination. By creating the focus for the destination and rewarding the dog with a bird on his arrival, we are instilling great confidence in a young dog. We need them to feel confident that where they are going is the right place! Success begets success.

### 3. Articles to Retrieve

As I mentioned above, a young dog working through his yard program is undergoing stress. It is up to us to have the field be as stress-free as possible to counter balance this; all while being able to advance the dog's marking. One thing to think about is what article you are asking the dog to retrieve in the field, especially if encountering a difficult patch in his yard program. I make a point to use a different article in the field than I use in the yard. For example, if I used 2-inch bumpers while forcing the dog to the pile that morning, I will use large 3-inch white bumpers for his field work that afternoon. The goal is to not have a dog resentful of his field retrieves and we need to do whatever it takes to keep that dog marking. It doesn't matter all the time for every dog that I train, but there are some dogs out there that are not happy to retrieve the same object that they were forced on in the yard only hours previously. Definitely something a trainer should keep in mind – trying to separate the yard from the field.



### 4. Gun Recognition

The gunner (thrower) should be a focal point to the dog when he is on the line and out in the field. A gunner should always represent something positive to a young dog and no forms of pressure should be used around a gunner.

We like to start our young dogs out by teaching them to use their eyes and not their nose. This starts out on the line with very visible gunners and very visible throws. If a young dog is having a hard time picking out a gunner, then you should have the gunner do whatever it takes to pick him out in the field. This could include waving his arms, yelling or firing a shot.

I like to try to separate the gun versus the area of the fall (destination) as much as possible. The throws should be long and flat and against a background where the young dog is easily able to watch the bird in the air. A dog can't mark what he can't see.

### 5. Marking

I look at marking with young dogs as two points of reference: the line and the destination. It is ideal that a dog takes a straight line to the bird and then "finishes the mark strong" with a quick and concise hunt directly in the location of the area of the fall.

If you find your young dog running at the gun and not the destination of the bird, then you need to shorten up the marks for him to give him the confidence to run at the destination. I would not think about lengthening the marks back out until the dog was consistently successful at running at the destination of the bird.

But we have to lengthen a dog out at some point. One positive way to lengthen a dog's marks out is to do a "Fire Drill." Have a thrower shoot and throw, and send the dog as normal. The gunner will be ready to shoot and throw again at a moment's notice. If you see the dog lose focus, become hesitant or begin to run aimlessly at the gun, you can have the thrower throw a second bird. This will reestablish the dog's focus and pull the dog's momentum away from the gun.

To me, finishing a mark strong involves finding the bird quickly. I will oftentimes use an isolated heavy patch of cover to throw a bird into, as an example, so that the destination is clear to the dog. This way, the dog learns to go to where he saw the bird land and hunt tight in the area of the fall by digging through the cover to find his bird. If a dog is hunting a large area for a particular mark, then you should think



## Ask the Pro

about simplifying your next mark. Make the retrieve shorter or make the bird easy to find once the dog gets there. Too many big hunts will teach your young dog to be lazy in his marking. If a dog leaves the area of the fall, either by deliberately switching or putting on such a large hunt that he is in no man's land, I will have the gunner help the dog back to the destination. Oftentimes, we can be too quick to help a dog out if they have not come up with the bird quickly while hunting the area of the fall. Helping a dog too quickly can create a dog with a lazy hunt just as much as too many big hunts can. Unless the dog is getting himself in trouble, then let them hunt! This will also improve your dog long term in finishing marks strong by learning how to effectively hunt for a bird. But remember to try to simplify the next mark if you can after a big hunt.

Early on, the destination is all that matters to me when I get a dog in for training at 6 months old. A lot of people worry about a dog's line to the bird, but they don't worry about how quickly a dog finds the bird once he gets there. While I watch out for dogs that use the gunner as a crutch, as mentioned above, there are times that a dog needs to stretch out and mark the destination. If a young dog gets pushed off his line due to wind or terrain, my hope is that they will still recover and find the bird. If they are having a hard time finding the destination, then I will shorten the marks and simplify them. I want them learning where to look for birds. Once a dog has the ability to locate the destination consistently, even after being pushed off his line due to the factors in play, it is only then that I will worry about the line to the bird. It is usually at this point in the dog's life that he is starting to handle in the field, so we now have the tools to teach him to not only proceed quickly to the destination, but to go there straight as well. So, the moral is ... teach the destination first and worry about the lines second.

The only exception to this, for me, is on water marks. I do not begin to throw cheaty water marks for a dog until they are handling in the water, but I like to pick out my destination for water singles by placing a bird in such a way that a dog that makes the right decisions finds himself in the right destination.

## 6. Drills

Marking drills and marking setups are two different areas of field training to focus on. Marking drills can be used to teach a dog many of the concepts he will be facing as he advances through his competitive career.

With drills we can teach a young dog how to do an inline triple, how to punch tight past a flyer station to a long gun, how to become proficient at short marks and much, much more.

An example of a marking drill is a Y drill, where a thrower can position the falls as singles with an in throw, a flat throw and an angle back throw, all from the same station.

There are many marking drills available in training literature with the idea to teaching a dog a new marking concept.

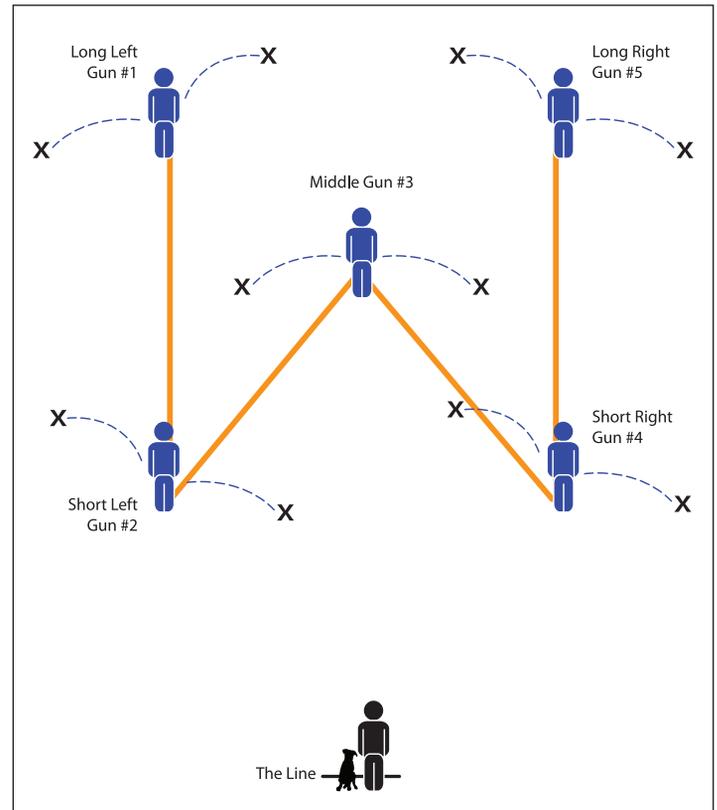
Sometimes a trainer can fall into the rut of running too many cold setups with their young dogs and then become frustrated when the dog fails the "test." Oftentimes, teaching the particular concept beforehand in a drill scenario can create a positive learning environment that transitions well to cold set ups.

Don't forget to balance your cold marking setups with marking drills.

### "W" Marking Drill

This marking drill can be done with either 5 stickman, 5 live people or a combination thereof. It should be run as singles with your young

dog and the degree of difficulty slowly introduced over time as the dog becomes more proficient at the marking concepts being presented. I would like to stress that I do not run all 10 singles in one set up, but usually 3-6 singles depending on the age of the dog, the level of their training and the particular concept I want to work on that day.



"W" Marking Drill

With a young Basics dog who is new to the multiple gun look, I will be looking to just introduce this drill in a simplified format. Oftentimes, I will throw one of the long marks as the first single as this fosters the focus we are looking to develop in our dogs. So I may throw gun 1 to the outside first, gun 4 to the outside 2nd, gun 2 to the outside 3rd and finish off with gun 5 to the outside, as an example. As the dogs get more proficient I will start throwing conflicting marks such as over/unders, through an old fall or check down in front of a bird they just picked up. To complicate this even further, a flyer station can be added as the center mark (#3) as be thrown first, or left until a later single. This marking drill should ideally be set up downwind for your dog and be done in a somewhat flat, featureless field. It can be in the same location, or moved. ■

## Vision Retrievers

### Clint Avant

Clint Avant of Vision Retrievers, LLC is located in Giddings, TX. He has been training professionally for 15 years. Clint was the trainer of the 2004 High Point Derby Dog and also started the 2009 NAFC. From 2011 to 2013 Clint accumulated 262 Derby points. He continues to train and run AKC field trials. Find Vision Retrievers, LLC on Facebook!

"Ask the Pro" is written by  
a member of the Professional  
Retriever Trainers Association.  
[www.prta.net](http://www.prta.net)

