

# The Art of Bird Placement

A Conversation of Contributing Writers including Andy Attar, Pat Burns, Wayne Curtis, Jim Gonia, Dave Rorem, Paul Sletten and Bill Totten

The art of bird placement vs. the mechanical orientation of a test is the focus of this article. We asked a dozen professionals to comment on the art of bird placement vs. mechanical attributes of tests, and we include many of their thoughts here. We would like this to be the start of an informative dialog and we invite you to send your ideas and experiences to enrich any continuation of the dialog in future articles on this subject.

## Andy Attar:

Bird placement as identified in this article will be concerned with the actual creation of marks in a marking test. This topic, perhaps, is the most relevant concern in field trials today. Our founding fathers appeared to realize this. Purist of the game, our leaders in the game, our most experienced participants of the game, recognize the art of bird placement as the single most challenging, most elusive, and most difficult skill set to grasp of all the skill sets regarding training and trialing. The incredible attraction that field trials offer is that our founding fathers placed such a high regard on a retriever's ability to mark game they have seen. Evaluating this skill set truly requires a judge and a trainer to dedicate a tremendous amount of energy to the development of placing birds in a field and over the water. As we begin this discussion, understand the word "art" is not used lightly. We will attempt to quantify as much objective science in this discussion but know the wonderful nature of our sport allows for artistic interpretation in creating tests which directly relates to the task at hand.

## Pat Burns:

I think you're talking about old school. Andy and I got our start in this sport in the Chicago area. At that time there was a very active and successful group of amateurs led by John Trepacz. They were masters of bird placement. They taught us how to throw birds where dogs didn't want to go. It is really that simple. Let me repeat myself. Good bird

placement is throwing your marks where a dog wouldn't go unless he knew there was a bird there. That being said, it is easier said than done. Interpreting the affects of terrain, wind, water, cover and distance all come into play; that skill I practice every day. My goal is to put birds in places when Fido chooses a path of least resistance he is not rewarded. I would prefer to focus on evaluating terrain factors at test sites more than configurations. I think that is another subject.

## Andy Attar:

If there is anything that should carry through the ages, regarding our game, it is the spirit of how our early participants felt about retrievers and marking!

Our start (early to mid 80s) had more to do with strong, hard working dog training minds but perhaps aging training principles. The most important take away from my perspective was all these guys and gals loved to watch dogs work hard, using their physical assets and their brains to find their marks. And do not forget, Pat, many of the folks we started with chose to shy away from the collar and used other forms of aversives to discipline dogs. But training methods notwithstanding, can't we all agree at the end of the day we are looking for good markers and the environment to evaluate them?

And for the record, I totally agree with your last sentence, "focus on evaluating terrain factors at test sites more than configurations" (tightness of marks). I feel this is the essence of our topic at hand!

**Q** How do you describe the art of bird placement when very often it's test mechanics that cause marking difficulty?

## Pat Burns:

A good bird is a mark that a dog sees and can't find. So keeping a dog from seeing a bird thrown is a poor excuse for bird placement.

## Andy Attar:

Pat, I could not agree with you more regarding the dogs seeing the birds. On paper it is not easy to make a whole day the same for the visibility of marks but it should be the goal.

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## Dave Rorem:

The simplest way to describe a good place to put birds is to put them where a dog doesn't want to go. Canines, both domestic and wild, are lazy by nature and they don't want to use any more energy than they have to... to find a meal or to retrieve a bird. When looking at land or water for bird placement, pick out areas that look like they are hard to get to or are hard to stay in and dig out a bird.

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### Paul Sletten:

There should not be a single contestant that has difficulty seeing the bird during the whole test! White tape is great. If you're worried about the dogs finding the bird in the fall area because of the tape then drag several branches out to the fall area to hide it. Birds should not be thrown where gunners have to move to retire. An extra 15 minutes can fully brush up and conceal a holding blind so only 4 or 5 steps are necessary. Otherwise dogs marking the bird and keying off a holding blind becomes very random.

### Jim Gonia:

Without much thought, bird placement is huge. If there is one thing I would like to get in, it would be a good thrower. A long throw, quite distant from the gun station, combined with an obstacle (cover, water, ditch etc.) separating the bird from the thrower will tell a judge a lot. The wind, of course, although somewhat unpredictable, should be as downwind as possible. This is certainly no new idea but I do not see it enough at trials.

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perhaps a bird would be two-thirds to the end and many dogs would begin to look for the bird once they got to the end of the field, or, my personal favorite, using the sides of the field where angles become the difficulty (two retired guns down the side of a field). Most dogs do not angle things well and often times have to know exactly where the birds are to do well on this test.

And wind? What is so important about wind? It is our most significant factor we deal with today if you ask me! Ask any judge, at the top of their wish list in marking tests would be a single perfect direction all day or no wind at all! It brings up the thing you always say, "Once the dogs get there, it will be difficult for them to find the bird" if they have no wind. Most dogs have noses, but it's all their senses, including their intelligence, that we want to see working.

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### Bill Totten:

Bird placement is often a misunderstood aspect of training and competition. In training you might be concentrating on concepts, either the way a configuration of guns play off of each other or such as, 2 down the shore. Neither of these situations is related to bird placement in my opinion. Bird placement instead refers to the relationship between the actual fall of a bird and its relationship to the terrain and the wind direction and strength at the time of the test or training exercise. A very wise and experienced judge once said to me, "Bill, it's really simple, put the birds where the dogs don't like to go." When I am training or when I judged as an amateur, many, many moons ago, I always look at the terrain first, and place the falls in the terrain to teach or test on the dog's ability to cope with that terrain. The secondary consideration will be from where and what direction the gun should throw the bird. My third consideration in training will be wind direction and do I want to help or hinder the dog in its ability to find the mark. If I am judging or testing the dogs, the wind is more important in that it can and will override terrain and bird placement. Wind is the trump card when setting tests for trials, in my opinion WIND TRUMPS EVERYTHING, it will make or

break any test set up. In training this can be used as a training aid when utilizing severe or difficult features of terrain.

### Wayne Curtis:

The one most important issue for any marked retrievers should be to have the mark be downwind as much as possible. If there is an issue that I see at more trials than not, it is the lack of respect that an awful lot of judges have for a dog's nose. Our retrievers live by their nose more than we will ever understand. If we are to find out how well they mark, we should keep the wind to their back as much as possible in order to keep their nose from taking over on the way to a bird. By having the wind at their back they will rely on what is ahead of them more. That alone makes finding their scent cones a little more difficult, which in turn should have them hunt more so, if they are not positive as to where they saw that bird. With that perspective in mind it then becomes a matter of judging!

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**Q** *When you look at a field what are the key bird placement locations you try and find?*

### Pat Burns:

That is a really good question! There are marks that are hard to get to and easy to find. And there are my favorite, marks that are hard to get to and hard to find. I always look for birds thrown across obstacles. For example, ditches, channels of water or across cover barriers. Finally, the lost art of throwing a bird in the water.

### Andy Attar:

The interesting thing about all your favorite marks is that it requires the use of all the dogs' senses and courage. That great bird you speak of, in the water, with the right wind, is deadly because dogs would prefer not to hunt while they are swimming. If not exposed to this, dogs would wait till they got on land and wished a bird would come out of the ground. It is a lot of work for a dog to swim compared to being on land. It's also my most favorite mark in the whole world. And for the record it is hard to teach many dogs to be good at this!

**Q** *If forced to use a featureless field on a factor-less day, what does good bird placement mean?*

### Pat Burns:

First of all, a featureless field is actually a feature itself. Marking in flat, feature-less fields can be very difficult. A factor-less day is the same. I assume you are referring to no wind? Some of the most difficult tests can be in a field that all looks the same. The biggest challenge is in hiding the retired guns.

### Andy Attar:

Featureless fields? In Northwest Indiana, where we started, a hill was perhaps where an ant mound started! And certainly our current concerns as a group regarding how to hide a holding blind can come up here! I think good test design has to do with viewing the field like a dog would. How about using the end of the field as a general factor where

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**Q** *In what order do you feel the key factors in a test change as a result of a test aging?*

### Pat Burns:

I am always amazed at a National how seemingly subtle changes in conditions dramatically change the dynamics of a test. A five degree wind shift or a lighting change has huge effects on success rates. As drag back builds up, paths are also created. One can make a test more difficult where the other makes it easier.

### Andy Attar:

Who ever asked this question has judged a few times before! How do you think a short bird will hold up after 50 dogs have run? 50 birds and 50 dogs mucking up the area??? And what about a flyer? A flyer pheasant? One of the most difficult birds at a national can be a flyer due to the varying falls. And of course the more that fall, the difficulty is often times increased. Our game is not perfect and in some areas we have to be aware that the last dog who runs will have a test that is different than the first. Being aware of light, shadows, scenting the falls before starting, being careful and specific about retired guns, and other things can eliminate some dramatic changes. In another article we can talk about what judges and trainers can and can't control to strive for fairness. To answer as directly as I can, a well balanced marking test should result in one factor change perhaps increasing the success of one of the birds and make another much more difficult.

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### Wayne Curtis:

The other birds in the test will help with the judging as they will affect the sizes of the hunt or the ways of the dogs hunt. People really need to remember what we created these retrievers for, and the respect of the abilities that the dogs have will make for a much more pleasant judging assignment. Judges can then decide what type of dog they would like to watch by knowing they have done as much as possible to promote the use of the eyes versus misinterpreting the use of the nose because of the ease of trailing due to a crosswind and into the wind birds.

Go downwind!

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**Q** *When do you know, really know, how good of a test you have?*

### Pat Burns:

Most of the time not until I have seen a few dogs run. So many times a difficult looking short bird turns out routine. And also an innocent looking short bird produces large amounts of failure. The ability to set up challenging short birds requires constant practice. Keep experimenting!

### Andy Attar:

The older I get, the sorrier I feel for the judges of big entries. I run 24 dogs, set up tests for a living, and by the time I run 4-5 dogs and make a couple of changes, I have a pretty good test. Judges are stuck when they decide and this is why this discussion is so important. Marking tests are like a painting, and at a trial, you are not drawing in pencil. Discussions like this are perhaps one of the most important we can ever have!

## CONCLUSIONS:

### Pat Burns:

Don't get so wrapped up in configurations and marks that only have merit due to their relationship to other retrievers. I believe most experienced dog people will tell you that the most challenging mark is a middle distance retired gun that is well placed and the dogs actually have to MARK IT! With all the advancements in modern training techniques, there still is no substitute for the art of a well placed bird and raw marking!

### Andy Attar:

In conclusion, there should never be a conclusion on this subject. The more experience one gets regarding this topic, the more one only realizes how much there is to learn. To develop instincts towards good bird placement, one must truly have a handle on how dogs negotiate direction during their retrieves. How they are affected by terrain, wind, etc. Other important factors along the lines of this discussion involve fairness in marking tests for large entries, what judges can control and not control, how bird placement relates to the other birds in the field and what roles field trial committees can have in supporting the proper mechanics necessary to run a trial which can lead to helping bird placement by the judges. ■