

The Art of Bird Placement

A Continuing Conversation of Contributing Writers including Andy Attar, Pat Burns, Dennis Bath, John Russell, Ken Thorson and Rick Van Bergen

In December 2012, The Art of Bird Placement ran for the first time. We received many comments, which are shared in this next article. Comments overwhelmingly mentioned that a great mark requires “ensuring” dogs can see the gun, see the bird and see the fall. Other comments cover the more advanced use of terrain. We asked Pat Burns and Andy Attar to review the comments and to enhance the subject further. We expect you will have reactions and insights and invite you to share them with us by writing us at info@theretrievernews.com

THE MOST EXPERIENCED participants of the retrieving dog sports recognize the art of bird placement as the single most challenging, most elusive and most difficult skill set to apply consistently of all the skill sets regarding training and testing. Putting down a test on the weekend that is relevant to the field or pond, weather and dogs skill levels in front of you without contravention of the Rulebook or appropriate safety considerations is very demanding. Regional custom and grounds conditions vary, but the Rulebook and our dogs basic physical abilities are the common denominators that hold us together.

The most frequent AKC rule violations involving judging and bird placement are all found in STANDARD PROCEDURE FOR NON-SLIP RETRIEVER TRIALS – TRIAL PROCEDURE – Number 8 – Page 28 – these basic problems are easy to avoid.

• WALKING GUNS TO LURE DOGS FROM FALL AREA

... The permitted movement of retired Guns and their associated bird throwers should be limited to the minimum distance required for effective concealment.

... Such retirement should be in a direction away from the direction in which the bird is thrown

... The blind must be so located as to minimize the development of a trail that will lead the running dog away from the area of the fall

• FAILURE TO BRUSH UP HOLDING BLINDS

... Retired Guns and throwers should be concealed by a blind that provides complete coverage, adequate space and natural camouflage to conceal the distinctive shape of the blind

• POOR VISIBILITY OF GUNS

... and the Guns shall be so stationed as to be conspicuous to and easily identified by the dog

• POOR VISIBILITY OF BIRD THROW AND FALL

... On marked retrieves, a dog should be able to see each bird in the air and as it falls

• MOVEMENT OF GUNS WHICH DISTRACTS DOG

... every reasonable effort must be made to ensure that the movement of Retired Guns is only permitted at a time and under conditions to minimize the chance that the running dog will be distracted by such movements

The Basics of Quality BIRD PLACEMENT

- DOGS CAN SEE THE GUNS
- DOGS CAN SEE THE BIRD
- JUDGES CAN SEE THE HUNT
- DOGS CAN HUNT SAFELY

The following are insights and comments from many well known individuals are supported by both the Rulebook and their many years of training, testing and judging.

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John Russell:

I believe the mistake a lot of people make is to arrive at the grounds for a judging assignment with a preconceived thought of a type of test or configuration that they would like to put up in that particular trial. I think that this often leads to some disregard of the terrain and conditions that may greet you on those grounds. I have long tried to follow the rule given to me by Hugh Klaren many years ago, and that was to find and place what you believe would be the best bird for that location. Once you have done that, the other birds used there should be to enhance and/or distract from the bird that you thought was best for that location.

Rick Van Bergen:

Many things come to my mind when discussing bird placement. Skill and luck both come into play. When asked to judge a lot of thought must go into where and how birds are placed. Terrain consideration, wind direction are very important aspects.

Bird placement should take advantage of terrain and wind as much as possible. I like the idea of putting birds where dogs don't want to go. I also like the idea of an obstacle in the way of getting there; bushes, a clump of trees, a piece of water. I like putting a bird where there are all kinds of room for a dog to run around. Especially behind the bird.

I feel very strongly that the guns should be visible and the bird should be able to be seen throughout most of the throw. Keep in mind that a dog's vision is much better than ours.

Lighting conditions are most important; looking straight into the sun is difficult, if not impossible. Glare off water can be a problem, too.

The biggest problem I see is large numbers of dogs. Judges today are asked to judge 90-100 dog trials. This is a huge burden that makes a lot of judges shy away from what we are discussing and throw tests that are killer tests. I've run several trials where after the first series land marks 20-30 dogs are called back. I understand why these tests are set up and there are always some dogs that will do it. But, that takes away the intent of this sport; which in my mind is letting the dogs eliminate themselves and at the end of the trial the "cream has risen to the top."

To summarize, I will point out that most of the items in this discussion are found in the Rulebook. Reading and re-reading the book can't be overlooked.

Ken Thorson:

The Art of Bird Placement is difficult to explain without a complete understanding of dogs' nature. Because they are predatory animals, they have a keen awareness of the terrain traveled in their quest. Marks must be placed with this understanding, as well as with a recognition of the additional elements affecting that mark, namely, direction, depth, and area of fall. A well-placed key mark works well in drawing a dog into an area he otherwise does not want to enter, but visibility of all marks is crucial.

Since a dog's natural tendency is to give in to the elements, wind direction can have a tremendous effect on the placement. Further consideration should be given to gun placement, the throws (over and under, flat or back, short bird first, equal distant long falls, close or tight falls), and the addition of obstacles such as ditches, levees, hedgerows, elevation changes and angular terrain.

All field trial dogs have the ability to use their eyes, and if well trained, will run with the use of peripheral vision or hold a given line, all the while maintaining focus on the mark. Therefore, the above-mentioned considerations should be kept in mind when determining the proper placement of a mark.

Charlie Hines:

Take whatever is provided by the field or water and consider the natural factors, such as trees, bushes, ditches, creeks, ponds, side hills, cover, water entries, exits and re-entries, shorelines, points and last but not least the wind. By combining these "factors" with angles of approach (across a ditch, up or down a side hill, across rows of corn, long water entry, fighting a cross wind etc.) we can produce a well placed mark. Every key bird that is difficult has some aspect to it that is angled. Even when birds play off each other there are angles of approach that influence the outcome. Although we continually train the dogs to deal with factors, dogs don't navigate angles well. To create the perfect mark incorporate these factors pushing or pulling away from the bird and support its difficulty using angles to complete the mark.

Dennis Bath:

Bird placement is not something that comes automatically with how long you have run dogs; it is instead learned from being a student of the behavior of these dogs when we are training with our training group (professional or amateur) as this is your classroom. You must be a student of the game, in the field, no matter with whom you train. We must constantly be studying and figuring out why the dog can't find the bird or why he found a bird that looked like it would be difficult. Bird placement is a lot like advanced mathematics, you have to have a good teacher and you have to be in the classroom to excel, paying attention to the lessons.

A dog's key assets in the field are his eyes and his nose. If you remember that straight down wind marks take away the use of the dogs nose, then their nose and the wind can only get them in trouble on a down wind mark. (Drag back, other marks or prior dog scent) Therefore, they must rely on their eyes and intellect until they get a little deep of the mark or into the scent cone and turn into the wind and demonstrate they marked the area. If other factors are involved with getting to this bird are used to support the wind direction, such as difficult terrain, without it being dangerous, you now have a well placed mark and one that will be interesting for all to watch. All of this is convenient if your line to the bird discussed is downwind, but this is not always possible. The lack of grounds providing obvious factors which support bird placement, forces judges to show how

much homework has been done studying dog behavior to evaluate good dog work as opposed to creating bad dog work with technical or training type tests.

In some fields, birds thrown close to cover that is protected by the wind direction (so that dogs must go into the cover to wind the bird) can be effective. Birds thrown close to tree lines where they must go really close or into woods to wind the bird can also be effective. Birds thrown from the land to an island where there is larger water down wind from the bird, can be hard to get. Most angles are hard for dogs to navigate such as birds thrown on an angle over a "safe" ditch. I have observed that dogs just don't angle factors well as it's easier to square ditches, cover or water. Finally, the bird we are all afraid to throw, a bird in the water as dogs don't generally like to hunt in the water is a powerful bird separating dogs most of the time. I know with today's pen raised birds we fear the sinking bird, but dogs like to run around shore lines vs swim and hunt. If we have nice birds to use this water bird is a favorite. Remember, as time passes and tests age, birds well hidden by the wind will be easier to find as trailing scent build up or the wind can change – so try to not rely on a single key bird.

I do want to stress some other important points. 1) If you employ cover or tree lines, remember you cannot judge a dog you cannot observe hunting in or around the area of the fall. 2) Remember, it's not possible for a dog to mark what it cannot see, a gun or bird that cannot be seen is not a well placed bird, instead it's a poor mark producing random outcomes. 3) The adage, "when in doubt just stretch them out" is not a well placed bird, rather it's often a lining test – a trained ability, and you may like that ability as a judge, but it's not a well placed bird concept. I personally would rather see short well placed birds put out by an expert student of the game as it's more interesting. I'm aware that many times the field trial grounds don't lend themselves to short birds or intermediate distance birds where the terrain is there to make it hard to get to the birds and that the best judges or professionals will improvise at that time. This is a very important subject and we can improve bird placement if we all study these wonderful animals and we team together to improve our sport.



Ten Ideas on BIRD PLACEMENT Well Worth Remembering

- The type of marks you set up should reward the qualities that you most value in a retriever.
- A gun or bird that cannot be seen is not a well placed bird.
- Dogs don't angle factors well as it's easier to square ditches, cover or water.
- You cannot judge a dog you cannot observe hunting in or around the area of the fall.
- When in doubt just stretch them out" is not a well-placed bird, rather its often a lining test.
- Often times the line to a mark or achieving the fall area demonstrates a lot about the dog's training. What they do after they achieve the fall area tells you more about the dog.
- Put birds where you would find them if you were hunting and that's not that hard when you look at a field.
- Look for the "seams" in the field, the places where cover, terrain, swales, ditches, trees, brush, etc., can create some difficulty and angle throws across or into those areas.
- Too often the order of throws, visibility and the proximity of marks forces the judgment of marks away. Marking ability and the outcome is heavily reliant on training attributes or even random work by dogs.
- Protecting the area the dogs will wind the bird is crucial for a good mark.

The Art of Bird Placement

The dialog between Pat Burns and Andy Attar continues regarding what they have observed about bird placement during their many successful years of professional training and competing...

Pat Burns:

I have just finished reading and was very pleased to see the comments of the latest contributing writers. These authors are some of the most respected in our game. And for good reason! These amateurs have spent many years judging, handling, training and appreciating retrievers in field trials. These personalities are the reason the game goes on. I have the ultimate respect for them and what they have to contribute.

I would like to talk about a few points regarding this subject. I believe that the type of marks you set up should reward the qualities that you most value in a retriever. In other words, your test should reflect your highest priority skills.

Often times the line to a mark or achieving the fall area demonstrates a lot about the dog's training. What they do after they achieve the fall area tells you more about the dog. I always look for a bird that a dog has to work hard once they get the area of the fall. I constantly look for "questing birds". They are birds that require a lot of courage and perseverance. One example is a bird that is thrown out in the water and requires a dog to leave the security of the land and gunner to find the bird. Don't confuse this with a disciplined stay in the water bird. The discipline the dog requires to do this kind of bird well comes from within. I always look for that bird, and every now and then I find one that really works. It still takes my breath away to watch a dog that won't be denied.

Andy Attar:

What a great way to phrase a goal of a judge? The type of marks a judge sets up at a trial should exactly equate to what he values in a retriever the most. For me this would include intelligence and courage.

So how does one create a mark to test these admirable qualities? From the previous comments of experienced judges, often times it is through experience and instinct, putting birds where only a smart, courageous dog would go. Last weekend I heard a very experienced judge say that the marks he set up were easy to create because he quickly ascertained

by viewing the field where the not so smart dogs would choose to look first.

By way of example, dogs have a propensity to square hills, water, ditches and almost any transition. Putting birds where dogs have to angle these transitions can often times be difficult. Also, dogs often times like to get to the top of the ridge or hill before looking for a bird. Placing birds at the bottom or half way up can be challenging. Smart judges use these examples to make birds hard to get to. Your bird in the water is probably the best example of a challenging fall area. Put both of these examples together and judges can end up using a lot of lead on their sheets.

And to add to the icing on the cake, protecting the scent cone or area the dogs will wind the bird is crucial for a good mark. In the example of the angle comments, for those dogs which squared the ditch, they should be on the wrong side of the wind to find the bird with their nose and those dogs who have efficiently traversed through this factor should in a better position to be more successful.

Pat Burns:

Andrew, you made some great points. I am very big on protecting the downwind side of a bird. However, I don't feel all tough marks have to be downwind. If you can protect the downwind side of a bird or make the crosswind such that it is difficult to achieve the fall area, you can have a very well placed bird. But they are risky. I have witnessed plenty of Nationals where there have been dramatic wind shifts. And in some cases tests became more difficult with what should be a less favorable wind. For example, a directly into the wind bird can be almost impossible if you get deep of it.

In regards to terrain, I have found that subtle terrain changes can be more difficult than extreme ones. A well schooled dog can read a steep slope and recognize this as a factor but often times a more gradual hillside can lure good dogs away from their goal without them knowing it. I found that also to be the case with wind. Your thoughts, Drew?

Andy Attar:

What does "protecting the downwind side of the mark" mean Patrick? And are you saying that a crosswind mark must be impossible to be near to be good?

Pat Burns:

In response to your second question, no I am not saying that a crosswind bird must be impossible to get to be good. However, you must have the downwind side of the bird protected. Protecting the downwind side of a bird means making it very difficult to be on

the downwind side. One example might be throwing a bird tight to a brush pile or some other obstacle. Thus making a wind save very unlikely. Protecting the downwind side of a planted blind can also produce some very challenging blind work.

I want to talk about the subject of distance. I am not in favor of ridiculously long marks. However, what length does it force a dog to maintain his focus for a longer period of time. This is one reason that water marks are typically more difficult. It just takes longer for a dog to achieve the fall area. Making it more likely for a dog to be distracted while in route to his destination. Let's take that one step further. One of the most difficult marks is a longer short bird. I am describing a scenario where you have a well placed retired gun short of a stand out gun. And the shorter retired gun has factors in route and is relatively long. Shew... that can kill 'em!

One last thing, everyone can set up a test that no dogs can do. Everyone can set up a test that all dogs can do. The real challenge lies in placing birds where you get the just right amount of success. And that you are rewarding admirable qualities, not just random behavior. Dennis' point about continuing to be a student of dog work is profound. I remember an old saying, "When you're green you're growing. When you're ripe you're rotting". It couldn't be more appropriate in our unending quest in learning "The Art of Bird Placement."

Andy Attar:

That's a really good point regarding distance. Selection, fighting the wind, swimming, being affected by another closer mark...all these factors are more difficult when you add distance. One thing I am constantly reminded of regarding distance is that sometimes a 500 yard mark seems shorter than a 250 yard mark. Lighting, terrain, background are such strong influence on how far a mark really seems. The marks position in the field is another huge factor. Some fields are just difficult to get to the end of and others it appears, the dogs do nothing but want to run to the end. The actual distance of the mark is not a very meaningful fact when discussing the mark.

There are some very important points to consider regarding longer mark: visibility, how light affects this during the day and the safety of the dogs must be a consideration. We have all seen marks so long and so difficult to see that the dogs could not be stopped when lost and that's simply not acceptable. And of course as the weather turns warmer, a set of long marks can become dangerous. The safety of the dogs is everyone's concern including the judges. This truly is another whole subject.

One final comment, it is my strong feeling that in training and at trials if we are not concerned with the actual visibility of the bird, if we are just concerned with the gunner visibility, if it does not bother us to throw a severe angle back bird at a long distance, then we are simply testing dogs ability to remember where guns stood. Heck with the price of birds these days, perhaps that's not such a bad idea! (HA! Just kidding!)

To sum up my feelings of long marks, I support distance as a factor in setting up marks. A retriever that can "mark" game wherever it visibly lands is valuable and if a judge uses his terrain well, distance is a great challenge. The folks that do not like long marks because it does not assimilate a normal day's shoot have never hunted with you. (not kidding!)

Your comment of finding just the right difficulty is the most challenging of all the topics in which you have spoke. I can never remember everything in the Rulebook, however the phrase "dogs will be judged on relative merits" always sticks in my head. Having a test that creates similar successful work makes judges default to being too picky and separation is never pleasant. A good marking test allows judges to judge, compare, and evaluate qualities they want to see more of at a trial. It's difficult to come up with good marking tests. It's intriguing, and one of my most favorite subjects.

Pat Burns:

We have only scratched the surface. There are so many other important topics on this subject. We need to talk about things like, hen pheasants, pheasant fliers, flier memory birds, cover, hiding holding blinds, orders of throws, how tight is too tight, the bird way out of the test, a tough to see bird and a marking test vs a training test. That is only a few. The list is endless. I guess we need to save some for later...

Drew, we could stay up all night discussing this. And if my memory is correct, we have a time or two. You and I have spent the majority of our lives pondering these dilemmas. The journey continues. ■

Pat Burns

Join Pat in this continuing journey! He is currently offering a variety of services. They include personalized coaching sessions, boot camps, workshops and customized training experiences. If you have any interest, you can check Pat's website www.patburnsretrievertraining.com or email him at pburns32@gmail.com

Autumn Run Retrievers

Andy Attar

Andy has trained retrievers since 1985, spending almost 10 years with Mike Lardy at Handjem Retrievers. Since then, he has owned and operated Autumn Run Retrievers. Please contact Andy at andy@andyattar.com