

The Art of Bird Placement

A Continuing Conversation between Contributing Writers Pat Burns and Jerry Patopea

PART III

In April 2013, The Art of Bird Placement ran its second installment. This third submission is an informal exchange between Pat Burns and Jerry Patopea which continues 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 to continue this very important discussion.

Pat Burns:

I would like to open this discussion by welcoming my good friend Jerry Patopea. I have known Jerry for 30 years. Jerry and I have had some great conversations regarding this very topic. Most of these discussions took place competing at Nationals. I can't think of a better arena to talk about the use of flyers than a National Championship.

Pheasant flyers and especially hen pheasant flyers make for some of the most challenging scenarios faced in our sport. This goes for both judges and dogs. Then make these retrieves memory birds, wow!! I am very torn on this matter. The most memorable tests and dog work I have ever witnessed have included these factors. On the other hand, so have some of the most unfair situations. This is such a two edged sword. I would hate to think of the game without them. They provide the opportunity for dogs to do extraordinary things – things that you would never witness or dream of under any other circumstances. The randomness requires great challenges for judge's interpretation.

Jerry, you wrote a great article titled "Sa-gac-i-ty."

Sa-gac-i-ty: The trait of solid judgment, intelligent choices and keen perception. I can't think of a more worthy quality to reward in our sport. Arguably, the above-mentioned dilemma tests the sagacity of our dogs as much as any other challenge faced.

Jerry ... and your thoughts?

Jerry Patopea: May 27

Pat, when you mentioned sagacity in your last paragraph, were you talking about the judges or the dogs? Because both need a lot of sagacity where flyers are concerned. Variation in falls and randomness of a flier, especially hen pheasant fliers, requires high skills by both the judges, in evaluating, and the dogs, in finding an individual bird in a bird field where possibly 100 or more birds have fallen in that area in the same day. Scent from all those previous birds builds up, and trails develop, and if your bird falls in close proximity to those previous falls, you are probably lucky.

If your bird hooks back, say, and the wind line from all those previous falls is stopping your dog from getting to his bird easily, he

has to know enough and be determined enough and have enough experience to counter all that scent build up and get the bird shot just for him. That's sagacity.

Even worse is probably the bird that flies in and the dog gets past it without scenting it before he gets to the scent area of all those other 100 birds. That scent locks him into that area and he needs skills above and beyond to come in against the scent to find His bird. That's sagacity to cry for. That kind of sagacity is very underrated on most scorecards.

Those skills are not "canned." Those skills are not developed in a box. They are partially natural and partially developed through years of "out of the box" marking development. They are the hardest of the hard birds to find, and oftentimes the least appreciated by judges.

I have seen dogs do incredible work on birds like this only to have the judges grade the dog down instead of grading him up for his sagacity because he had to hunt to find his bird.

Pat Burns: May 28

You make some great points. Especially, the challenges and responsibilities faced by judges when placing and judging flyers. There are a few things that immediately come to mind. One is to make sure that you give yourself enough room for a pheasant to fly. A pheasant can easily land 50-60 yards away from the gunners. Shooting your bird out of the test, rather than towards your other marks is often a wise move. Marking a flyer that is disassociated from the gunners is a huge challenge. So,

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 Art of Bird Placement

giving yourself enough area to allow the bird to fly can make or break a test.

One of the greatest tests I remember was the ninth series in the 1992 National Amateur Championship in Batavia, NY. The key bird was a retired duck flyer memory bird. It was shot way out in a large stump pond. The dogs that got out of the water where the live guns stood never recovered. I can remember sitting on that hill watching those great dogs try to sort out that mark like it was yesterday. It still brings tears to my eyes.

Okay, that is enough reminiscing. Let's get back to the topic of hen pheasant flyers. Hen pheasants are brown, not very large and fast. When shooting a longer flyer, especially out of a winger, it is very easy for a dog to never see the mark. By the time you hear the report of the gun, the bird is already on the ground. We all want the challenge of the test to be a mark that the dog sees and then has to work hard to find.

Jerry, what is your feeling about the pluses and minuses of using a winger on flyer stations? It seems that the skill of hand throwing a flyer pheasant is a lost art.

Jerry Patopea: *May 29*

Well before I answer your question, let me tell you I remember that ninth series well. I had two dogs handle on that flyer. It was a really great test to watch and the flyers were all really fair because there was no conflict of another gun station...just the water.

Another really great test that I remember well was a Midwestern National Amateur back in the 70s. Ninth series. The late Tommy Sorenson and Harvey Shue were throwing CONVERGING FLYING PHEASANTS on a hillside in cover. Harvey was throwing the first one, and if his bird came in or went long, Tommy would throw his bird back to even the spread. If Harvey's bird flew back, Tommy would throw his more square. That was some of the best throwing I have ever seen. Not many people can throw like those two.

Birds thrown into the test can be very unfair, especially if it's in a place where the birds won't fly uniformly. There are flyer stations I see being set up where I know there will be a lot of inequity among the falls. I don't know why judges would do that. I don't think that helps the sport.

Of course we need practice to throw a good flying pheasant, and with the increased practice of just using ducks at our trials, practiced pheasant throwers are hard to find. But a pheasant flyer out of a winger at any distance is preposterous to me. The bird comes out of the winger so fast a lot of dogs won't even see it, or recognize it if they do see it. A duck, however, from a winger is oftentimes a much better mark thrown from a winger than by hand, because they tend to fly a lot slower or maybe not at all.

Pat Burns:

Jerry, I want to thank you for taking the time to talk about "The Art of Bird Placement" with me. It certainly brings back memories of discussions we have had over a cold beer. I cherished those times we spent together talking dogs. I have always valued your perspective and am glad to be able to share it with everyone. You have always thought "outside the box".

We have only scratched the surface on this subject. Til next time, *your friend, Pat* ■

Key Points On BIRD PLACEMENT

DO's

- establish a large enough fall area to accommodate a long flyer
- appreciate a difficult fall and give due merit to an intelligent hunt
- make sure the birds are as visible as possible

DONT's

- shoot pheasant flyers into a tight test
- shoot pheasants out of wingers, especially hens