

Switcheroo

A HUNTER SHOOTS TWO DUCKS in a cornfield which fall close to one another. He sends his retriever and it retrieves one of the birds. The dog is sent for the remaining bird and it hunts for a while and then brings the other duck to hand. The hunter pats the dog on the head and says to it, “good dog!”

At a retriever field trial, the Judges have set a land test where two marks fall close together. The handler’s dog retrieves one fall and when sent to retrieve the remaining one, hunts, finds the bird and returns with it. When the callbacks are announced, this dog has been dropped.

What is the difference in these two scenarios? Field trials are governed by the *Rules*¹ concerning how the dog should hunt while the corn field dog has no such restrictions. The examples make one think of the caveat in the rules which says that tests are to resemble “an ordinary days shoot!” Throwing two birds close together tests marking ability for one fall but perhaps not for two. The dogs are sent to the same general location twice. This kind of setup is more like one mark rather than two. The rules anticipated that marks would be separated to test marking ability and there was then a need for the rule about switching. When marks are thrown close together, the evaluation of dog work on them becomes difficult. The notion of a switch also becomes difficult.

The field trial dog may have left the “area of the ‘fall’” and hunted elsewhere before retrieving either or both birds. That fault would account for the dog’s elimination. There are many other faults which, if observed by the Judges during the retrieves, could have led to the dismissal of the dog from the stake. The Judges may have believed that the dog ‘switched.’ If this dog stayed within the general areas defined by the Judges as “the areas of the ‘fall,’” or close to the margins of them while hunting and finding the birds, and with no other faults involved, then it should not have been eliminated. Good dog!

“Accurate marking is of primary importance.” (Rules, p. 28.)

It is often said that a dog ‘has a mark.’ What does it mean to say that a dog ‘has a mark?’ It’s a question of memory. It suggests that a dog has seen a bird fall, knows its location, and can quickly retrieve it. The first factor, seeing the bird fall, is critical. Dogs cannot ‘mark’ what cannot be seen. Judges provide tests that are intended to evaluate marking ability. They increase or decrease the difficulty as required for the stake. Do close marks actually test marking ability? Are tight marks tests fair to the dogs? It depends upon the distance at which the marks fall and the space and depth between the marks. There would not be any need for a rule about switching if marks were permitted to be thrown on top of one another. The rules anticipate that marks will be separated. The degree of separation is why there are judges.

The “area of the fall?” and the term, “switch,” are reviewed here since they are important in the discussions.

What precisely constitutes the “area of the ‘fall’” defies accurate definition; yet, at the outset of every test, each Judge must arbitrarily

define its hypothetical boundaries for himself (herself), and for each bird in that test, so that he (she) can judge whether dogs have remained within his (her) own concept of “the area of the ‘fall,’” as well as how far they wandered away from “the area” and how much cover they have disturbed unnecessarily. In determining these arbitrary and hypothetical boundaries of the “area of the ‘fall,’” due consideration should be given to various factors: (1) the type, the height and the uniformity of the cover, (2) light conditions, (3) direction of the prevailing wind and its intensity, (4) length of the various falls, (5) the speed of individual dogs, (6) whether there is a change in cover ... or whether the fall is beyond a hedge, across a road, or over a ditch, etc., and, finally, and most important, (7) whether one is establishing the “area of the ‘fall’” for a single, or for the first bird a dog goes for, in multiple retrieves, or for the second or third bird, since each of these should differ from the others. (Rules, pp. 50-51.)

Definition of a “Switch”:

A dog that goes to the area of the fall, hunts, fails to find and then leaves the area to hunt for another fall ... shall be considered to have “switched.” Unless in the opinion of the Judges there exist valid mitigating circumstances, the fault constitutes sufficient justification for elimination from the stake. (Rules, 35.)

And,

A dog that returns and systematically hunts the area of a marked fall previously retrieved should be eliminated from the stake, provided that where the area of the previously retrieved fall overlaps the area of a subsequently retrieved fall, no penalty should be incurred for hunting the area of the overlap. (Rules, 35.)

Tight marks are described by handlers as birds “thrown in a pile”; or, as birds “thrown in a basket.” Judges who set tight marking tests should be prepared to evaluate marking fairly and not be too quick to fold pages in their books. They should review the second part of the definition of a switch, listed above, which mentions the “area of overlap” in tight marks. The “overlap” can include most of the adjacent ‘area’ when the marks are tight and long.

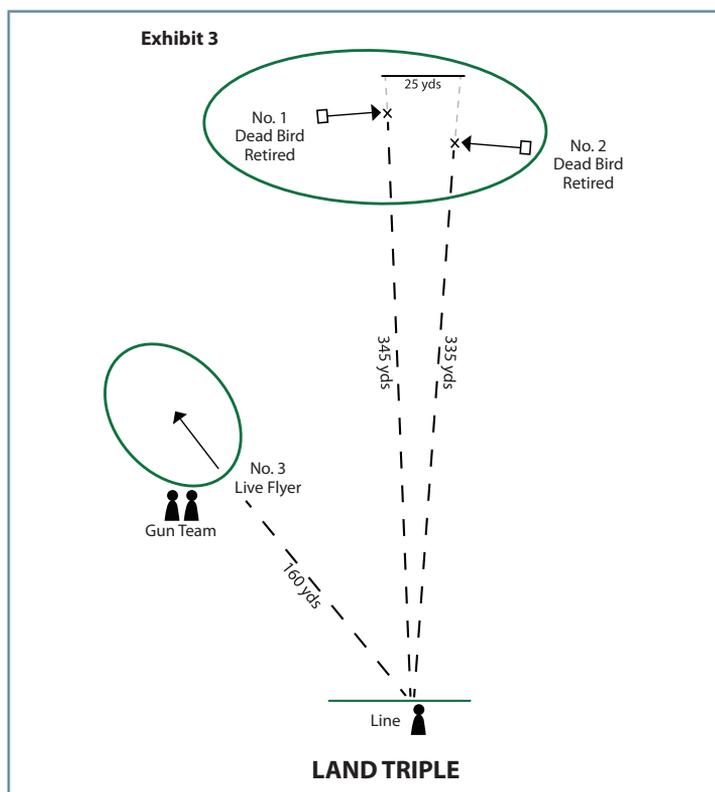
When Judges plan a land test for the first series, they sometimes set a trap. One kind of trap has marks that are so close together, or tight, that dogs may not know for which bird they have been sent. Some dogs, after having retrieved one of the marks, will be hesitant to return to those areas as they have been trained not to ‘switch.’ In marking tests, Judges have been known to attach different colored ribbons to the birds. The falls were so close together that this procedure permitted the Judges to know which bird was retrieved. If the marks are so close together that Judges cannot watch the dogs and know which bird was retrieved, how is a dog to know which one is the target bird, which one has been retrieved, and where the remaining bird is? Is this kind of test actually teaching dogs to ‘switch?’ Is it a good marking test?

Switcheroo – Judging Tight Marks

The major difficulties in this test are with falls no. 1 and no. 3. They are long and the spots where the birds land are separated by only 20 yards. This kind of test is sometimes encountered in the Open stake. Depending upon the wind direction and its intensity, either of these falls could be found when the dog is first sent toward them. Judges can expect hunts in both ‘areas.’ Fast dogs make wide turns and 20 yards is but a few bounds. Dogs will undoubtedly disturb ground in both ‘areas’ irrespective of which bird they seek. Judges should not penalize them for this. Discern whether the dogs retrieve the birds without going elsewhere than the two ‘areas’ and whether any other faults are committed.

Remember this: the research concerning vision in large canines confirms that ‘their visual acuity (marking), is only about 25% as good as that in humans. Some breeds like retrievers have been bred specially to see further. Those with no eye problems may see a bird fall at long distances as they are keen to motion.’³ When the ‘falls’ are beyond 300 yards, they see the bird in the air but do not know its exact location. ‘Their eyes are on the sides of their heads and the long snout blocks their focal point on long marks, especially when their eyes are focused below the horizon. When they look above the horizon, their noses do not block the focal point. A dog which moves its head when viewing that long bird throw, has an apparent change in the actual location of it. This is known as the parallax phenomenon. Light conditions and background issues can further reduce their visual acuity and depth perception at extreme distances.’⁴

Consider this Land Series.



When close falls are placed at extreme distances and two big fellas are throwing the birds toward one another, calling a “switch” becomes a real conundrum. After retrieving the flier, the dogs are faced with the two converged marks. The throwers are strong enough to have the birds fall within 25 yards of one another. The throwers retire as soon as both birds are down. The distances are extreme and the lines to the falls are tight. Tests like this have been used when there are 90 entries or more.

They work to drastically reduce callbacks; but, is it a good marking test? Why do so many dogs fail this kind of test? The answer is in the above paragraph.

Switching should not be a factor on tight marks at extreme distances unless a dog hunts only the ‘old fall’ and never goes to the other ‘area’ to retrieve the bird there. That is not really a ‘switch’; it’s a return to an old fall. The ‘area of overlap’ in these kinds of tests is huge. Retrievers can line out there and get extremely long marks. They may go directly to the bird. It is an open question as to whether they actually ‘had a mark’ or took a good line to the bird. When marks are at 300 yards or more, they should be separated by at least 50-60 yards.

A short retired bird with a mark yet to be retrieved deep of it is a difficult concept. This is a common test often seen. Short retired birds are known as “killers” especially for the high rolling dogs. Difficulty is created by tight lines to the two marks. The deep “stand out” bird behind the short retired one, should be separated by at least another 50-75 yards. This is a fair test when properly utilized. Judges can ascertain the value of the mark by observing whether the dog caught scent of the short fall when running past its ‘area’ on the way to the deeper bird; or whether the dog went directly to the short fall without assistance from its nose. Dogs honoring their noses should not be scored down for that trait alone. Observe other behaviors associated with the mark.

The test referred to as the “momma & poppa” is a ‘close marks’ test. It has the birds thrown from nearly the same position and 180 degrees apart. When the birds are thrown in a converging direction or toward each other, the test becomes unfair. Difficulty is increased when one of the marks is a shot live flier. The bird thrower(s) and/or gun team, usually retire behind an obstacle or a well camouflaged holding blind in a position central to the throwing station. When this test is set at distances in the 100-175 yard range, it is a fair test. Stretched to longer distances, it is not a good test and should be avoided.

There is help in the rules for scoring tight marks. The seven factors in the rules which address the arbitrary nature of the margins of an “area of the ‘fall’” assist in making decisions about dog work when the marks are thrown ‘in a pile.’ (See the above definition of “the area of the ‘fall.’”) There are other factors, too. Judges should: 1) be attentive to each dog when it is on line; 2) observe whether it ‘has a mark.’ They display ‘a mark’ by their attitude, by 3) their looking out to where they wish to go, and 4) by their demeanor. 5) Was the tail up or tucked? 6) What was its pace toward the fall? 7) What line did it take when leaving the handler? 8) To which ‘area’ did it go on each cast? 9) How quickly did the dog find the bird? These attributes provide an indication of whether the dog ‘had a mark.’

When setting tests, judges should be concerned about the question: how close is too close? A dog’s sense of smell has been estimated to be 100 million times⁵ more effective than that of humans. Wind can blow scent far. This is another reason to provide adequate space between falls. If a bird thrower can pitch a bird from one ‘area’ to another ‘area,’ that is too close. If the dogs can make a turn which takes them from one ‘area’ into another ‘area,’ that is too close. Another consideration is whether a dog which is intent upon a distant thrower can actually see a thrown bird. More separation of the marks and critical thinking about distance, light, and background will make the scoring and evaluation work of Judges much easier.

There are judges who wish to fairly test marking and their tests demonstrate their intent. Their marks are separated and well placed. When reviewing work on tight marks, sufficient “thinking room” exists in the rules for judges to use their discretionary powers in scoring the dog work. “Judging can never be precise; it is not a science, merely an art, and many shades of gray between black and white.” (*Rules*, p. 48.) Words

and phrases like hunting “too much ground,” “mitigating circumstances,” “overlap,” the “area of the fall,” and “switch” are vague and ambiguous. They require judges who set tight marks to make clarifying decisions in their minds about how to fairly and effectively score the dogs hunting for those marks. Their decisions should demonstrate a careful review of each dog’s work.

When judging close marks at extreme distances, be aware that when a dog enters an adjacent ‘area,’ its movement is not always a “switch.” A fast dog easily runs through a close ‘area’ without staying and without hunting there very long. These actions are not faults; they are hunting the “overlap” broadly defined. Remember that when a thrower can toss a bird from one ‘area’ to another, the marks are too close together. Extremely long falls are questionable as marks because the eyes of large canines like retrievers see movement but do not mark location well (depth perception) when marks are extremely long. Providing adequate space and depth between falls is a better marking test and facilitates the work of judges. To the handlers facing a tight set of marks, go slow, lock your dogs’ eyes on the target bird, cross your fingers and send. ■

¹ Field Trial Rules and Standard Procedure for Retrievers. Amended to November 2017, Published by The American Kennel Club. [Hereinafter simply *Rules*.]

² See also: Dennis Bath & Francis Keenan, *Judging the Area of the Fall*, Retriever News, Vol. 9, No. 7, October, 2016, pp. 28-32. This essay suggested that the term “area of the fall” was outmoded and no longer useful. It provided other methods for evaluating marking ability.

³ Kirsten. “How well do dogs see?” Service Dog Central. <http://servicedogcentral.org/content/node/391>

⁴ See: Paul E. Miller, DVM, and Christopher J. Murphy, DVM, Ph.D. “Vision in Dogs,” Journal of the American Veterinary Medical Association. Vol. 207, No. 12, Dec. 15, 1995, pp. 1623-1634.

⁵ Jon Bastian. “Through a dog’s eyes.” Cesar’s Way: Achieving Balance and Harmony. <https://www.cesarsway.com/dog-care/innocuous-behaviors/through-a-dogs-eyes>, p. 6. Scientific estimates of canine olfactory ability as compared to that of humans vary widely. All, however, indicate that the difference between the two is in the millions.

AT STUD

FC Public Enemies Crime Boss MH

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Dam: Castlebay’s Gift Wish QAA



OFA Hips LR-225592E27M-EX
 OFA Elbows LR-EL769668M27-N
 Eyes Cert: Good
 EIC/CNM: Double Clear



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- ★ FC at 5 years
- ★ Won first Open at 3 years
- ★ RJ first running AA stake at 36m
- ★ QAA at 2 years
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