



Training *Champions*

with Danny Farmer

Danny Farmer has trained more than 80 Field Champions and has won the National Retriever Championship four times. His DVDs Retriever Training Force Fetch, Basics, and Problems and Solutions are all available at dannyfarmer.com or where Avery Sporting Dog Products are sold.

Drills and Setups to Improve Marking

In our last few articles, we have focused on water marks and setups. Now we're going to concentrate on drills and setups to sharpen our dog's marking and focus.

One of the most important – and perhaps difficult – tasks for any handler is to properly line the dog at your side to the mark. This will be critical to you and your dog's success, especially on tight marks. You should be doing wagon wheel lining throughout your dog's career, as this will help develop and maintain his lining ability. You need to have the dog lined up on the mark, and you need to know where the dog is looking. Have the dog swing into *heel* and, with his spine aligned, get him focused in the direction of where you want him to go. It is critical that his first look is at the bird he's going to pick up. *He needs that*

Marking Drill – It's best to use 2" black bumpers.



first look – where the dog focuses or looks first is where he tends to want to go, so be sure it is at the bird you're wanting to pick up.

There is a fine line between sending the dog for a mark too soon and holding him too long, so read the dog by watching his breathing and ears to determine when he's focused and ready to go. It's much easier when marks are not closely related to each other, but when the marks are tight, your work on this will pay off. Again, the best drill for this is the wagon wheel lining drill.

Marking Drill

Let's start by reviewing the "marking drill." The idea of this drill is to take advantage of the dog's natural instinct to return to where he has been, but to still cause a small hunt so that he will

gain confidence in searching where he first found a bumper. This drill tries to help a dog develop a sense of the area of the fall, and to develop the habit of looking around close to where he first thinks the bumper has fallen. Again, we are trying to develop confidence in the dog to stay around the area. To do this, the gunner will remain stationary; since you are repeating this (the number of repetitions depends on the dog), the distance is relatively short (60 to 80 yards). Two-inch black bumpers are best, and as always, take the heat and physical condition of the dog into consideration.

You can start with any type of throw, and these can be done with or without a gun; the gunner can just

Marking Drill – To make the mark more difficult and so the dog will have to hunt, the handler holds the dog on the send.



give a, "Hup!" and throw on your signal. Hold the dog on the send to make it more difficult – you don't really want the dog to go and pin the mark; the idea is to teach him to hunt the area. It's important your gunner knows where the throw landed, as the next one should be in a different spot but in the same area so the dog starts to use his head. For example, shorten or lengthen the falls, throw in or more out. You can do this with angle-back throws, angle-in, hard back throws, flat throws, etc. The extreme of this is to remove the bumper, let the dog make a few passes, then replant when dog is not looking.

This should be a fun activity for you and your dog without any pressure involved. Your dog should be sharp in three areas: direction to the fall, depth perception, and staying in the area. This drill will help to improve these and your dog's confidence.

One of the best practices for marking is shooting lots of live pigeons. When marking problems occur, return to singles until marking is really sharp. Watch and learn your dog's pattern of marking. Dogs mark by watching the arc of the bird – practice this drill, or they won't develop that skill.

Long and Short Guns

This drill helps improve a dog's focus on a mark. Put two sets of gunners out, but only one shoots; the gunner can shoot twice – before the throw, and before the bird hits the ground. Before you send the dog on the single, hold him a little longer than on your normal send. You can continue this in different locations until the dog stays on mark a reasonable amount before looking at other gunners. This encourages concentration, reduces head swinging, and builds confidence.

You can also help a dog focus and stay on the long gun. You can throw this mark with a shackled bird or shoot a flyer; both should excite the dog enough to really watch and stay on the bird. This can be done as a single or in a multiple setup. If you are working on this in a multiple setup, be sure



Marking Drill – These color targets show where you would want to put your bumpers. (Note: this is an example only. You would not have these out in the field when doing the drill. Remember, you are trying to develop in the dog a sense of the area of the fall.)

to have the shorter gun stations spread way out and not near the long gun station. What makes the long gun difficult is that it's hard for the dog to look past the short sets of gun stations.

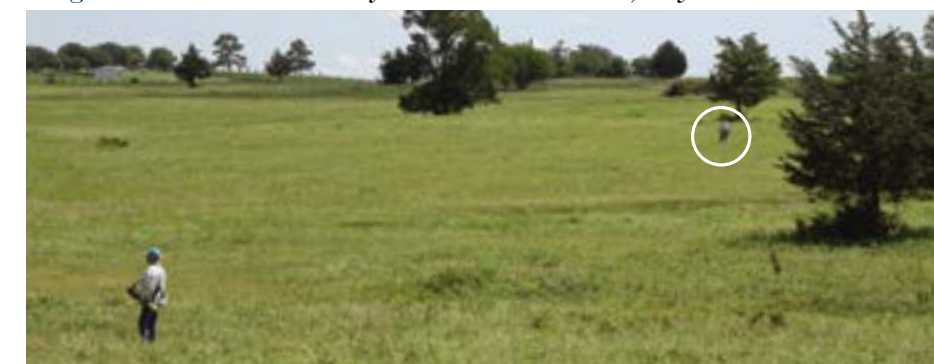
Long and Short Guns – In this setup, the guns are widely separated, which is how you want to start out.



Long and Short Guns – After the dog is successful, move them closer.



Long and Short Guns – And after even more success, they can move even closer.



You will also pick up marks from your short gun stations. You could have one gunner (person) long and stickman short. If you have a person or launcher at the second gun station, shoot the long station first as a single. Then do a double with the long station as the go bird. Practice different birds first – short then long, and long then short. If the dog is not

staying on the long bird very well, practice it more. After the dog has success on finding and staying on the long gun, then you need to move your short stations closer so the marks

are relative to one another, and the dog now will work on looking past the short gun to the long gun. You will need to mix up the live shackled bird or flyer being at the long station and short station to keep the dog balanced. Once you've got the dog doing well on the long gun, then I would move to dead birds at the long gun. I would also do the short bird first sometimes to keep the dog in balance, but only after the dog is successful on the long bird.

When shooting the long gun first, come to the line, sit the dog down, and call for the bird. You want him to get in the habit of looking in the field thinking something is going to happen and that he needs to pay attention. If he can't spot the gun, you have several options: have the gun holler and move around; have the gunner shoot; or anticipate this

problem and have the gunner wave a white towel as you approach and the dog sits down on line.

Once the dog sees the gun, call for it. Don't bring the dog to the line if the guns are not ready. Again, you want to establish the habit that when the dog goes to the line there is *action* in the field. It would be beneficial to use a loud gun or "boom" gun for the long mark to really get the dog's attention. *Do not* use any pressure associated with these marks. If the dog breaks down on his way to the long bird, you can have the gun holler to help him, or handle. You want to get the dog comfortable and relaxed doing these long marks.

Running Tight By a Gun

The two ways I would start working on this is to have a short gun and a

long gun behind it slightly offset. The throw will land tight behind the short gun. I would do this as a single, thrown by the short gun. You want to keep the dog in balance and don't want to get in the habit of going past a short gun station and not picking up a bird from it.

When doing the long single, if the dog flares the short gun, just stop and handle. You need to make him take the correct line, but don't apply pressure. I would then repeat to see if the dog understood. As always, you want to keep the dog's attitude up and get him comfortable going past the short gun. I would have the short gun fairly close to the line in the beginning.

Another drill I would do is to plant a long blind past the short gun, making the dog run tight by the gun.

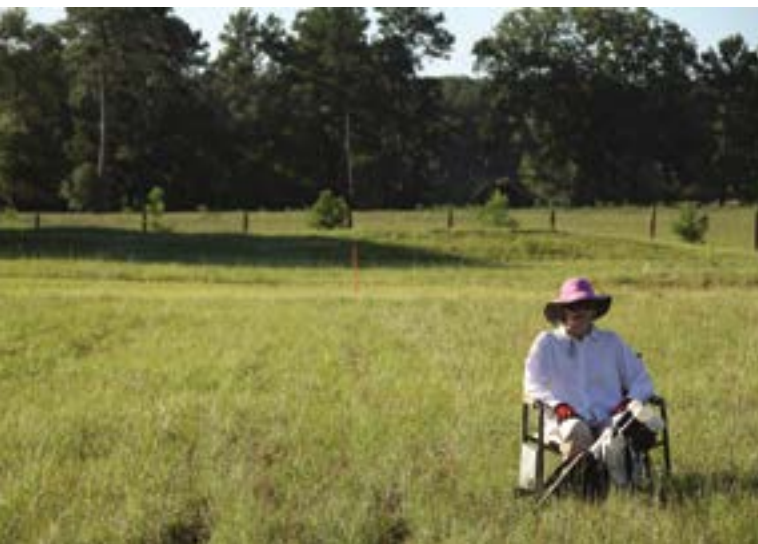
After the dog has picked up the blind, have the short gun station throw a



Running Tight by a Gun – Blind with Launcher.



Running Tight by a Gun – Gunner mark landing tight line past launcher and stickman.

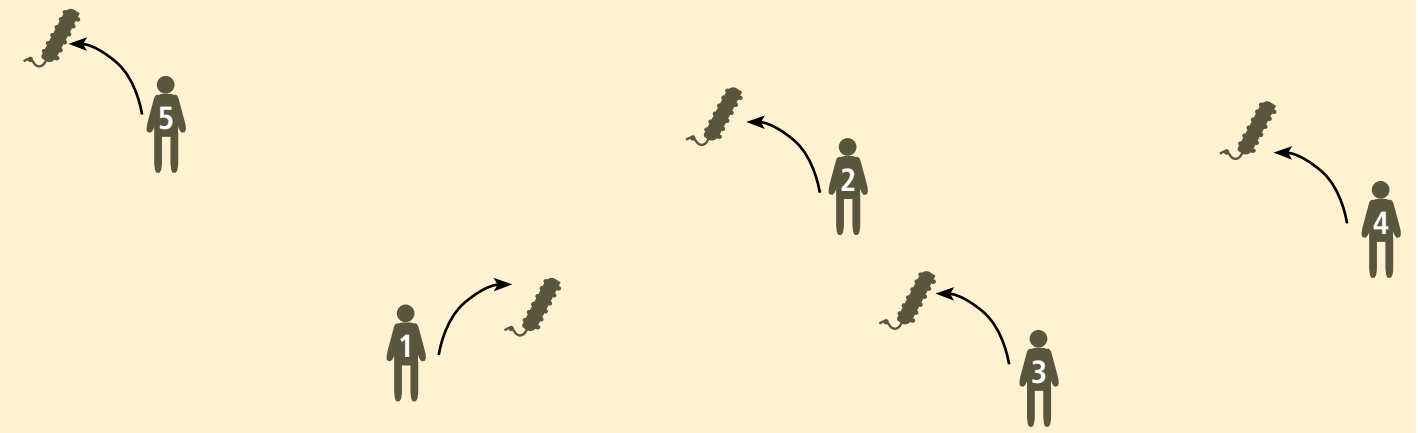


Running Tight by a Gun – Blind with person.



Running Tight by a Gun – Gun-Launcher mark landing tight line to gunner

All-Around Marking



Vary the throws to make it different (flat, angle back, angle in, hard back):

- 4 to be tight behind 3
- 3 hip pocket to 2
- 1 and 2 converging
- 5 tight behind 1

(Vary the order in which you pick them up.)



mark. Again, I want to keep the dog in balance and recognize that the short gun means something. You can alternate between running the single mark behind a short gun or running a blind tight by short gun.

Once the dog is comfortable going behind the short gun, you can start doing this as a double and even have the long gun as the go bird. You can eventually work on retiring the long mark as well.

Retired Marks

The best way to improve retired marks is to keep doing them. As mentioned in a previous article, start retired singles when the dog is young, even before he can do a double.

A few things to improve retired marks would be to do them as singles without any factors involved (where a dog would want to go); place the mark crosswind so he will have a successful retrieve; and salt (have several bumpers or birds placed down before the throw) the area for a successful retrieve.

Once the dog is doing the above well, I would start doing retired single marks with tough terrain and other factors such as wind and water. Once you are doing well with those, then do

them in a multiple setup. I would also spread the guns out to help with the difficulty of the retired gun.

Again, the best way to improve on retired marks is to keep doing them. Remember, if your dog is in the area but having a long hunt, do your best to let him figure it out. The dog has to learn to function on his own. Only if you are 100 percent certain they are leaving the area should you then ask the gun to help. If you do, I would have the gun stay retired and verbally help, and only come out so the dog could see him if the dog doesn't respond to verbal assistance. If your dog doesn't respond to any help from the gun, then handle, but only enough to keep him in the area. Again, only help the dog if you are *sure* he is leaving the fall area or you feel it's getting too hot. Again there is *no* pressure associated with these marks. Once the dog is successful on these, I would have the birds be relative (dog is influenced by the other marks) with the retired gun or gun stations.

All-Around Marking

Here is an all-around marking drill to do as singles to work on different concepts and to keep the dog sharp

and comfortable on marks, which will build confidence. This can be done with one person moving from station to station, or with launchers or wingers using stickman or hanging a white coat on a chair. If you didn't have any help at all, you could walk out and throw the mark yourself, leaving the dog on line, and walk back in and send; or if the dog is steady, you can call his name from the field.

Remember: *Attitude, attitude, attitude* is of utmost importance in your dog's marking. If on your marking setups he is struggling, back off and simplify. Likewise, if the dog is having consistent success, then you need to challenge the dog with more difficult tasks in the field. You have to be able to read your dog and plan your training around what he's telling you.

So whether you need to challenge your dog or if you want your dog to have success, that should determine your setups. The more comfortable and relaxed the dog is on line, the better he marks and the better his memory is. These drills and setups should improve your dog's success in the field. 🐾