

FETCH IT UP – a column on field training

by Doris Ehret

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Greetings everyone. My name is Doris Ehret, and I am addicted, you might say, to the field. I obtained my first Flat-Coat in 1989. Gus was a natural in the field and was a favored hunting companion as he often went “on point,” providing a great advantage to the gunners. With some help from a local UKC club, Gus achieved his UKC Hunting Retriever Champion title and AKC Senior title. A few years later, I began training with neighbors John and Nancy Miner who had considerable training experience involving hunt tests and field trials. I have since had three more Flat-Coats and one Golden and have put a total of 3 Master, 5 Senior, 2 HRCH, 2HR and 5 WCX titles on them. My present Flat-Coat, Tag (Hardscrabble You’re It), just finished his Master title. I judge AKC Hunt Tests and have apprenticed as judge for UKC Hunt Tests. Having trained a few dogs myself and having observed many more, I hope to offer you some tips that might guide you to success as well.

TRAINING GROUP ETIQUETTE

You’ve decided to train your dog yourself or perhaps you’ve sent your dog to a professional for some training. Either way, to play this game, you must become involved with other retriever enthusiasts. These people will offer both helpful criticism and encouragement. They need to be treated well. Here are a few baseline rules:

1. Be on time to training sessions. You learn how and why set-ups are devised if you are there to watch and listen. Coming late disrupts sessions and dismays those trainers of a more serious nature. You also risk missing an entire session if the group decides to change locations. Not to mention, that your fellow trainers will be worried about you.
2. Offer to help. This means each and every time. Do not be guilty of the dreaded “Run your dog and leave” phenomenon. Everyone is a bit selfish about their dogs (human-dog nature), but this is going overboard and will earn you a Hall of Shame award.
3. Keep your dog(s) under control at all times. It is a definite breach of etiquette and even dangerous to allow your dog to run loose while another dog is working. You expect your dog to receive its due attention when it is its turn to run. You need to accord others the same consideration.
4. Offer to supply equipment. No one expects you to provide remote launchers (about \$1000 each), but bringing a few bumpers to share is reasonable to expect. If you are just starting out and don’t have any, don’t worry. Many people find this sport to be fascinating and soon, you too might own all kinds of equipment you never knew existed. Please offer to offset the cost of popper shells or gas tanks for remote launchers. Be sure to share in the cost of birds, especially if live shot flyers are provided.
5. Do the best that you can when it is your turn to throw. It takes some experience to throw bumpers nicely and even then, they can take on a life of their own. And if you have never thrown

a dead bird before, it might seem entirely too formidable. Watch how others throw. Practice does help. If need be, go out with another thrower on a mark and apprentice while they throw. Ask ahead of time what to do should a dog have problems on your mark. Does the handler want to guide the dog him or herself to the bird or will you be expected to help the dog? Knowing this before the dog runs can decrease tension on the part of the handler and throwers. When you do throw, make sure you shout toward the dog to give it the best opportunity to see you. When you see it look toward you, go ahead and throw. It will now depend on the handler whether or not you sit down or remain standing (again, ask ahead of time). Either way, it helps the dog if you continue to face the mark until the dog has picked it up. Moving about, making noise or even making direct eye contact with the dog can distract it.

6. Treat throwers and gunners with courtesy when it is your dog's turn to run. Everyone can make a mistake throwing a bird or bumper. It is not the end of the world and your dog will not be ruined by it. If it is an intolerable throw, kindly ask the thrower to pick it up and re-throw it. While they are doing so, simply heel your dog off line for a few seconds and then return to the line. You will find that people who yell at throwers for whatever reason are often not invited to the next training session.

7. Spend your time wisely even if while throwing. I have heard of and even seen people who bring books to read while they are out throwing. These people are not learning how dogs operate. This is a perfect opportunity to watch dogs as they learn, how they use their noses under various scent conditions, how they respond to pressure and how their conformation impacts on their physical abilities. You can also study the handlers (no two are alike!) and decide for yourself when handling mistakes may have occurred. You might also see some excellent handling techniques that you too can emulate. Then, when it is your turn to run, you will be more confident and might even be able to avoid some pitfalls.

8. Keep the inevitable competition friendly. The people you train with will become your friends, but undoubtedly there will come a time when you might think, 'My dog should be able to do what that other dog just did.' To avoid ill will, always focus on what is best for your dog at that moment in time. If you succumb to pressure to compete with other handlers, your dog will suffer.

9. When in doubt, ask. As a novice in the field, you are in essence being asked to learn a new language. It can be difficult at first because you do not know what all the lingo means. For the most part, retriever people will do everything they can to help you and that includes translating strange phrases like, "He has long-birditis," or "Let's do a double-double with a poison bird blind." Soon you too, will be speaking this odd and wonderful language and it will even make sense.

The people you train with will become your friends. They will help you train your dog because they too love dogs and are so enamored of this sport. Treat them with respect and kindness as they are crucial to your dog's success.

If you are interested in field work, but don't know where to start, simply contact anyone on the FCRCI Board. There are a number of small training groups here in Illinois that are well-represented by Flat-Coats. An e-mail or phone call will get you linked up. Wishing you well in the field.

Start Right

Your new puppy has just arrived. Believe it or not, it's time to start field training. The two most important suggestions I can give you are:

1. Use a long-line on your puppy every time it is with you.
2. Teach your puppy to come when called.

A long-line is simply a long rope that you attach to the puppy's collar. You should use a thinner, shorter rope for young puppies and a thicker, longer rope for older puppies.

A 10 -15 foot length of clothesline works great to start with. The weight of this rope is light enough to prevent a dragging effect on your puppy. A heavier rope can discourage early retrieval attempts. Continue to use clothesline, but add length to it until the puppy is bigger. You'll know it's time to change to a heavier rope when the clothesline "bites" into your hand if your puppy pulls on it. I like to advance to boat rope for the bigger, stronger puppy. It is soft and thick enough to prevent hand injury and can be purchased at any hardware store. You should lengthen this rope depending on how well your puppy does on the recall. If your puppy does well, you will never need more than 10 - 15 feet of rope.

This gets us to the crucial issue of puppies coming when called. This should be the first command your puppy learns. To set the stage for this command, bond as much as possible with your puppy when it arrives. Teach it that being with you is a fun thing to do. Watch for those moments when the puppy is on its way toward you. Use a command ("Here" or "Come") and reward the puppy with praise and food when it reaches you. Once the puppy performs this task, I like to repeat the command. I do so in this manner: "Fluffy, here!" – the pup comes; then I say, "Good – Here" and praise the dog. Enunciate, "Good" and "Here" clearly and firmly. You are actually teaching the dog these words and repetition is necessary. Your puppy will learn that the word "Good" means it's done the right thing, no matter what the command. Avoid using lots of other words while you are teaching a command. The other words become babble and your command word can become mixed-up with it. Dogs communicate primarily with body language and you can use this to your advantage. Smile and say "Good" when your dog obeys. Frown and be silent when it doesn't. Reserve petting and food for good behavior and reinforce using these immediately. Give a tidbit and pet the dog while you say, "Good – Here." Keep your voice light and upbeat.

Never give the "Here" command if you cannot enforce it. And once your puppy knows the word, you should only say "Here" once. If your dog does not comply, use the long-line to pull it in toward you. Then say, "Good – Here" and praise. Keep these sessions brief and happy (a few recalls and quit). Incorporate game-playing to strengthen this command. Play hide and seek. Again, just a few times. The moment your puppy loses interest is when the game is over.

Okay – you've done everything right: taught the words, used praise and food and body language properly. No matter how willing the puppy, there will come a time when it will turn and go the other way. We might as well call the long-line a "life-line." Not only does it keep you in control at all times, it can literally save your puppy's life. Start using it in your house. Your puppy will

soon learn it has no alternative but to listen to you. This will form the basis of all future field work. If your puppy totally disregards your "Here" command, step on the rope, stop the puppy, go to it and pull it toward you while saying, "No – Here." Once you get back to where you were when you first called your puppy, say, "Good – Here." Your puppy will learn that "No" means, "Oops, I did the wrong thing." Offer extra praise the next time the puppy responds correctly. Consider how your puppy's mother taught it right from wrong. She probably gave the puppy a bit of a shake when it was naughty. Sometimes it's okay to let your puppy know you are angry. Just don't lose your temper. Keep your anger controlled. Follow up a negative correction with a positive moment as soon as possible.

If you are diligent, your puppy can have a decent recall by the time it is 8 to 10 weeks old. As it gets older, you can plan for distractions to reinforce this command. There are lots of distractions in the field, everything from bird scent to cow pies to other dogs. Insist on the puppy coming to you when called. Make the most of your puppy's malleable spirit and awesome learning ability. You are developing respect that will be essential as your puppy gets older. Good luck.

PUPPY FIELD FUN

Your puppy is still very young, possibly only eight weeks old. You've already started to teach it, "Come" or "Here." Now is the time to take advantage of its natural tendency to follow you wherever you go. With your puppy attached to its light long-line, head for the field.

You must exercise good common sense with puppies less than 4 months old. Consider the area you will be exposing your puppy to. You want it to be as safe as possible. Do not go to areas that are heavily used by other dogs. While you need to give your puppy early exposure to many different environments, you also want to avoid the possibility of disease transmission. The more dogs in the area, the more waste matter can be found and, thus, increased risk of contact with contagious disease or parasites. And, since you can't always anticipate the behavior of other dogs around puppies, avoid physical contact with other dogs as well. Be aware of any natural hazards that could be dangerous. Your puppy will quickly develop a distaste for the field if you walk it through thorns or if it falls from a height or into a hole. Remember too, it can sometimes be hard to see a puppy in cover because of its small size. Never lose sight of it.

This is time for just the two of you, a chance to continue the bonding process you've already started in your home. Basically, you just need to go for a walk. Let your puppy walk through light cover and check out fallen logs and brush. It is not uncommon for dogs to experience "fear periods" as they grow up. If you start your puppy young and let it develop confidence in the field before these "fear periods" occur, it will have less difficulty. You want your field dog to be sure of itself. Socialization to other people and to the outdoors will ensure this. Observe your pup while it is in the field. Is it bold and happy (doesn't need fixing), tentative, but curious (needs some encouragement), fearful and crying (may need lots more effort on your part)? Be cognizant of where your puppy is in its emotional development. Don't ask it to do more than what it tells you it is capable of right now.

Keep your walks cheerful. Watch for signs of fatigue. Alternate carrying your puppy and then letting it walk again as you go. It would be highly unusual for a puppy to not want to keep up with you, but should you be the proud owner of a renegade, use the long-line and reinforce your "Here" command. Lots of praise for good effort just as when you're in your house. Don't be afraid to start using your whistle. Since you will be close to your puppy, watch the volume. You don't want to blast it. If you have not already developed your own style of blowing a "come-in" whistle call, do so now. It has been found that dogs will more naturally come in to you if you blow a series of short toots. Listen to other people at hunt tests or in your training groups and try to imitate some of those calls.

Before you whistle-call, give the command, "Here," then blow your call. Encourage the recall by running backwards or using the long-line. Right now, in this strange environment, you are the only familiar thing to the puppy. If you run slowly away from the puppy, chances are it will follow. You have essentially become its "mother" or pack member and you represent a safe place to be. When the puppy reaches you, say "Good, Here," and pet and praise. At this point, you are only acclimatizing the puppy to the whistle. Don't expect anything close to a solid recall to your verbal command, much less the whistle. That will come very soon as long as you are consistent.

Food. There should be no ironclad rules about the use of food for reinforcement in the field. If it helps, use food rewards whether you are in the house or out of doors. Even on short walks, your puppy is using energy to keep up with you. There is no harm in reinforcing good behavior with a treat and re-supplying needed nutrients. While it seems like you are just having fun, this is really work for a puppy and working dogs need sustenance. Don't forget to supply water too. In warm weather, don't let your puppy get over-heated.

How often should you do this? As often as possible. Some owners are fortunate to be able to be in the field on a daily basis. Others may only be able to get out on weekends. If you are one of the latter, make sure you are going for walks near your home on other days. When puppies are little, even a walk around the backyard can be of benefit. You are establishing a friendship/working relationship for the lifetime of your dog with this start. No matter how your puppy "turns out" in the field, it will always be foremost a companion. Good luck on your teamwork.

EARLY RETRIEVING

You may have noticed that I have not even mentioned retrieving until now, with the 4th article in this series. By the time you get to this step, you should have established a groundwork for all future retrieving work by creating a partnership with your puppy, making sure it is comfortable in the field and teaching that it absolutely must come when called. Let's start retrieving!

Two caveats before you begin. One, do not discount the puppy who displays a poor effort at this time. Two, the recall is always more important than the retrieve.

To start, begin in your home. The tried and true hallway situation is best. Throw something small enough for the puppy can actually pick up. You can't expect a young pup to pick up the bumper that an older dog wouldn't think twice about. Improvise. Use a rolled-up sock or very small canvas bumper designed specifically for puppies. It doesn't matter what you throw, as long as it is soft and small. Fleece toys can be super for this work.

Throw in a confined area so that the pup has only two choices, to stay where the thrown object is or to return to you. Use the long-line as needed. You'll know you need to attach it to your pup if it does not return to you, even once. If your pup ignores you, say nothing. Go to the puppy and attach the line. Then go back to your starting point and call it once. If it continues to ignore you, establish control by stepping on the line. Go to the pup and shake it by the collar and say, "Here," while taking a step backwards. Praise immediately for any forward movement toward you. Continue correction and praise until you return to your starting point (ultimately, this will be the "line" in the field). If your puppy brings back the object, fine. If not, be satisfied with the recall. If the puppy runs out to the object, does not pick it up, but comes back to you immediately when called, give it lots of praise. Dogs are supremely good at reading your body language. So, even if you are not happy, don't show it unless the pup gives you just cause (by not coming).

Magical numbers abound in ancient literature. For the field trainer, the magical number is 3. The small puppy gets only 3 retrieves at a time. The thought is that if you do more, you tire the puppy and decrease its desire. It is paramount that you develop desire in your puppy. Lack of desire is the downfall of many a retriever. There is nothing more distasteful to a field judge than to watch a dog that does not want to work. It can be grounds for failure.

You can do several things to develop desire. One, use your "happy" voice for these initial retrieves. You may not even realize the effect your voice has on your pup. If it is at all harsh, your pup will think it is doing something wrong. If so, it will hardly want to retrieve. Have a friend nearby listening who can give feedback on how you sound. Two, let your puppy begin its retrieve while the object is being thrown. This "breaking" behavior is corrected at a later age. You don't want to impede any forward movement at this time. Three, encourage chase behavior. To do this, tie a piece of string to the middle of a dish towel. Play with your puppy by jerking and pulling on the string so the dish towel appears animated. Give verbal praise when your puppy catches the towel. Steal a trick from the pointer people and tie the towel to some fishing line on a fishing pole. Use the pole to jerk and lift the towel for the puppy to chase and grab. Instead of a dish towel, substitute a bird wing if available. Three, if you are very fortunate, obtain some quail or pigeons. Clip the wings and let the puppy chase in a confined area so it has some chance at a successful catch. Four, let your puppy watch as older dogs do their retrieving work.

Keep all sessions brief. Stop while the puppy is still eager to chase. Remember the number 3. Start all work indoors and as soon as your puppy gets the hang of it, move to the outdoors.

There are puppies who from day one, are eager, avid retrievers. Nothing seems to stop them. Then there are those puppies who watch as you throw an object and seem to care less. These puppies can still turn out to be fine working dogs. Don't give up. Some people have a real knack for starting out these young dogs. Other owners just have bad timing, poor coordination or a physical inability to get the pup started. It can be very hard to accept criticism from others, particularly when it comes to your dog. However, do try to have a training partner watch carefully what you are doing and listen to the feedback you get.

This is a wonderful time in your puppy's life. Keep it fun, and good luck.

EARLY MARKING

By now, your puppy should be somewhat solid on its recall, be showing some desire, and have been exposed to birds or at least to feathers. Now to begin honing its marking ability.

Marking is a very interesting phenomenon among our retriever friends. The ideal retriever “pinpoints” its marks. This means that the dog watches carefully as the mark is thrown and lands. The dog then goes directly to the bird or bumper when sent. The dog that can do this across long distances is a wonder to watch. You can imagine the asset a good marking dog is to the hunter. This dog is more likely to find and retrieve all of its birds, thus conserving game. Marking is a quality that is judged and graded during hunt tests and trials. The “pin pointer” gets a “10” for the marking score. The more the dog must hunt around for the bird, the lower the score. Not all dogs are good markers. Many factors come into play. It is believed that heredity plays an important role and that excellent markers can beget excellent markers. Ophthalmic disease obviously can affect marking. Cover, obstacles, distance, sunlight, background color, decoys and gunners can all work to make marking more difficult. Lack of outstanding marking is currently being bemoaned among some field aficionados. Marking ability should continue to be bred for.

Although heredity helps to determine marking ability, you can help your dog become a good marker. Everyone probably knows this, but it needs to be said: Start with short marks on short cover. Make it possible for your puppy to succeed. This is definitely outdoor work. Discuss all possible outcomes with your training partner before you even take your pup out of the crate. The last thing you want to do is begin shouting to one another over the puppy because there has been a misunderstanding. To begin, decide what your partner is going to throw for your puppy. Will it be a bird, a canvas bumper or possibly a white fleece toy? Use what you know your puppy will most want to retrieve. Choose the location for the “falls” (where the object will land). Up until now, you have been throwing everything for your puppy. Now someone else will be doing it. Big transition for a pup.

Here is the ideal scenario: your partner calls and throws the object; you send your pup on its long-line while the object is in the air; pup runs directly to the object, picks it up and returns to you when you call, “Here”.

Here is a more realistic scenario: your partner calls and throws the object. You send your pup while it is in the air; your pup leaves, but you’ve neglected to check placement of the long-line and since you’re standing on it, pup gets a big jerk and runs back to you thinking it has done wrong. Hint: know where your long-line is at all times.

Or, your partner calls and throws the object. You send your pup while the object is in the air. You’re not standing on the long-line so pup runs out to the object, but does not pick it up. It instead runs over to the thrower for some happy puppy love time. Hint: Pre-instruct your partner to ignore the puppy initially (not even eye contact). If the pup persists in visiting, have the partner bump the puppy gently with a foot. Meanwhile, you are on your way out to help the puppy. Use your happy voice and go to the object, throw it up and encourage the puppy to pick it up. As soon as it does, run back to the line, calling the pup. You can hope that your puppy will bring the object all the way back, but even if the object gets dropped along the way, be happy with the recall. Make the retrieving effort comfortable (happy) and the visiting uncomfortable.

While your puppy is beginning, you want to help the pup instead of having your partner help, if possible. Remember, you are making the transition from solo-throwing in the house to a two-person set-up in the field. If the pup is of the more focused variety and really wants to get to the object but can't find it, this would be your fault for setting up a difficult mark. Then you should have your partner help the pup find it.

Here are some additional aids in teaching your pup to mark.

1. Never throw into the wind.
2. Have all marks thrown parallel to you and your pup. No angle backs yet!
3. Tie a piece of white ribbon to the object so that it flutters while in the air, which makes it more visible. White objects can be seen best against dark land surfaces; dark objects on snow.
4. Before throwing, have your partner swing the object in a circular manner (this works best with bumpers). Then have your partner call your pup's name, followed by, "Hey, hey!"
5. On line, put your pup between your legs, facing outward toward the fall area. This is how you start teaching the pup to keep its spine pointed in the direction of the fall. Hold your pup up on its hind legs if necessary to help it see or focus.
6. After your partner throws, send your pup. Any faltering on the way out will clue your partner to yell and throw again. Be forewarned that if there are two objects to pick up at the fall, the pup may get confused.
7. Remember the magical number 3. No matter how well or poorly your pup does, stop at three retrieves. But use your judgment. If your pup doesn't seem to want to retrieve, maybe you should give only one retrieve a day for awhile.
8. Don't expect your pup to bring the object all the way back to you. Consider yourself very lucky whenever that happens. Focus on the recall above all.
9. If there are other pups at your training session, make this marking business a group effort. Line up handlers and pups, well-spaced apart. Let them take turns retrieving. Let the most eager retriever go first. They will learn from watching one another, and competition can do wonders for the less enthusiastic pup. But don't let them play with one another when they're at their workplace in the field. They can do that somewhere else.
10. Be aware of your surroundings and possible diversions. Puppies have very short attention spans, and some will find any excuse to forget about work. Find as quiet a place as possible for this marking activity.

MARKING

Once your pup is familiar with picking up short marks thrown onto short cover, you can start increasing the length of marks. A very young pup may start marks at a distance of only 10 to 20 yards, then gradually increase to 50 plus-yard marks. Remember, each pup will react to training individually. Continue to encourage the “slow-starter.” Move the “go-getter” along more rapidly. You will be advancing your dog’s marking ability based on future field trial and hunt test demands. Although you will not expect a beginning pup to run complicated marks at this time, you can be breaking down the concepts involved so that your pup is at least exposed to some challenges.

Continue to have marks thrown “parallel” – straight out from the thrower (not angled back or in). Make sure your dog can see each mark clearly, both the arc of the throw and the fall. You may need to kneel down to your dog’s eye level to check. The thrower must be visible as well. Ideally, the thrower will wear a white shirt or jacket. Your dog will learn to look out to the white, knowing that this person will be the source of a bird/bumper. Depending on the distance and the environmental conditions, you might also ask your thrower to wave a white shirt before the throw, to help attract the dog’s attention. This is just another aid to help your dog be confident on the way out to the fall. In both field trials and WC/X tests, the gunners will be wearing white. Camouflage clothing is required for hunt tests. Do not succumb to the idea that you should have your thrower wear camouflage simply because you plan only to run hunt tests. You are teaching marking at this time. Do everything you can to help your dog be successful. Dogs are extremely adaptable. You can always teach your dog to mark off camouflaged or hidden gunners at a later time. Conversely, if you train in the north in winter and must deal with snow, have your thrower wear dark clothes to contrast with the environment. What you want right now is to have your dog go to the area of the fall with enthusiasm.

As long as the dog can see the thrower, you can have marks thrown at greater and greater distances. Eventually, you may be able to ask your dog to run marks that are 300 to 400 yards away. If your dog can do this, think how easy it will be for your dog to run marks in hunt tests, which are typically under 100 yards.

Never neglect your short marks, though. It is possible to train a dog who is a fine marker for long marks, but misses or overruns the short ones. When I first began field training, I was taught that the last retrieve should always be the longest mark, no matter what. This was believed to instill control in the dog. The dog would likely be tired after the earlier retrieves, but must still rise to the occasion and go long. Nowadays, I make sure that the short marks get as much consideration as the long ones. Depending on the day and the dog, the short mark may get picked up last. Try to be as adaptable in your training as your dog is.

Do your very best not to repeat marks. If your dog failed to find a bird/bumper without help, think about why that happened. Then go to another site and try to re-enact the same situation. Simplify if necessary to allow your dog to be successful. There are marking concepts that you will undoubtedly need to repeat over and over again during your dog’s career. Just try not to repeat the actual marks themselves. The last thing you want to teach your dog is to return to an old fall. If the dog does this in a test or trial, it is grounds for failure.

Do not let your dog run behind the thrower en route to the fall. There should be little excuse for this when you are only having single marks thrown. If it looks like your dog is going to make this mistake, have your thrower help the dog before it happens. The thrower can throw another bird/bumper to help keep the dog on path, or the thrower can take a few steps toward the bird and tell the dog, “Get your bird.” The importance of preventing this error will become clear when you move to multiple marks, since it can lead to switching and an early drive home from a test.

Dummy launchers can be absolutely wonderful—for the advanced dog. You may not want to use them for training young dogs. Nothing takes the place of an actual human thrower who can help your dog hone marking skills.

A “huppy” is a bumper thrown by the handler at the end of a training session that the dog is freely allowed to retrieve. Its primary function is to relieve tension and keep the dog alert and happy. Huppies are not for every dog. Some dogs are just too darn happy. A huppy for them may ruin your hard work steadying for tests and trials. After all, if a dog can be unsteady for a huppy, why be steady for marks? Not very consistent training. A suggestion: read your dog. The dog who appears eager every time does not need huppies. The dog who needs encouragement does. Decide how badly your dog needs it. Release the dog to be unsteady if necessary to jazz the dog up. If only minor glee repair is needed, keep the dog steady while you hand-throw a bumper, then send. Use your voice on the return to praise, and let the dog know how pleased you are.

MORE MARKING

You've probably realized by now how important I believe marking to be. It is a talent that should be bred for, as it is easily lost. As a judge, I remember the dogs who mark well even if they fail the test for another reason. It is a beautiful thing to watch a dog pin multiple marks. With your dog's innate ability and your patient, careful training, you can hope to experience such a thrilling experience with your own dog.

For now, continue on single marks only. Some trainers think that you should not introduce multiple marks until your dog is handling (taking whistle and hand commands to reach a bird which the dog did not see go down). These trainers believe that if your dog has trouble on a mark, you can then handle to it. Other trainers believe that you should never handle a dog to a mark; if the dog has trouble, the thrower should help the dog. These trainers only handle on a mark during tests or trials when it becomes absolutely necessary. Since the dog who needs help from throwers during a test or trial will fail, you might wonder which approach to use. Here is a suggestion. First of all, begin multiple marks only after your dog has been very successful on nearly all the single marks he/she has been exposed to. By this time, coincidentally, your dog should have been introduced to handling. Avoid handling on marks if at all possible. Continue to have your thrower(s) help.

There are dogs who develop an annoying habit of thrower dependency. The dog will start running directly to the thrower and not to the mark. The dog expects the thrower to help, so does not make the effort to mark on its own. This must be stopped as soon as you see it start. (Remember the "magic number" – 3? Just as we use three successful attempts as the basis for making progress, the same applies to bad habits. Stop errors before they become habits; these are made quickly.)

When you see your pup go to the thrower instead of the mark, go out and make your dog go to the mark. Make sure your dog understands you are unhappy about this with your facial expression and tone of voice. The thrower should stand silently and avoid eye contact with the dog. Analyze the situation. Have you moved too quickly to difficult marks? If so, take a step backwards. Simplify and run shorter marks. Keep the dog focused on the marks. If the dog keeps being distracted by the thrower, you may need to return to running on a long-line, particularly if your dog has not been force-fetched and collar-conditioned. The long line gives you a way to gain control of the dog and enforce your expectations.

There are a variety of marking drills in the many books and tapes produced by more experienced trainers than myself. Please look into these to give your pup the best chance possible to excel at marking. Here are a few that you might want to try:

1. Progressives. The thrower throws straight out, not angling forward or back. Pup retrieves it and returns. The thrower then walks directly away from the line, for 20 to 50 yards, and throws again. Your pup must run through the "old fall" to get to the new mark. Should the pup hesitate at the old fall, have the thrower help the dog continue forward. Once the retrieve has been completed, the thrower moves away from the line again and tosses another mark. This time, the pup must run through two old falls to get to the mark. You are teaching the dog to obey its eyes

rather than its nose. This concept can be difficult for the young pup, and you may need to shelve this drill until the pup is older.

2. Walking Marks. All marks are thrown straight out, but the thrower walks at an angle away from you for all subsequent marks. This allows you to advance the pup on distance without running through old falls. You can also have the thrower walk in toward you at an angle so that you get some short marks too.

3. Multiple throwers. If at all possible, accustom your pup at a young age to having multiple throwers in the field. Concentrate on one thrower and one mark at a time, but utilize all the throwers during a session. This helps make the transition to successful multiple marks later on.

4. A drill to help the dog mark off the bird and not off the thrower is to have the thrower toss a bumper one direction with the wind. This bumper will go fairly far from the thrower. After the retrieve, have the thrower throw the opposite direction into the wind. This will likely be a considerably shorter throw. This will challenge the dogs who learn to judge how far a thrower can throw, then run out a pre-established distance from the thrower to look for the mark.

5. Round Robin. Introduce angle-back marks by having the thrower throw slightly in towards the line. The next mark is thrown straight out, and the following is thrown angled back. Then the thrower turns and faces the opposite direction and throws an angle-back, then straight out, and finally an angle-in. The dog gets six marks and each succeeding marks challenges its depth perception. This can be fascinating to watch.

Add cover and obstacles. A good rule of thumb is to shorten the distance whenever you increase the difficulty of the mark. For instance, there might be a log for the dog to go over between you and the mark. If you truly expect the dog to go over the log, you need to start up close to the log and do what is required for the dog to understand what is expected. This is one of those cases where you might need to repeat a mark several times as you gradually back up away from the log. Same thing with tall or thick cover.

Happy Marking!

MIND YOUR MARSHALL

Veteran field enthusiasts already know who the most important person is at the hunt test or field trial, but newcomers may not. And no, it is not the judge nor is it the other judge, for you will hardly speak to these people nor even see much of them as they stand silently behind you for the few minutes it takes to run your dog. Instead, it is the Marshall with whom you will have the most contact. This is the person to pay attention to.

Depending on the club hosting the event, the Marshall for each stake may have only the responsibility of organizing dogs and handlers for the judges, or they may be much more involved, to a degree that you are not even aware. For instance, job duties for the Marshall may include being there the day before for set-up with the judges, making sure a test dog is available, putting up signage, garnering equipment and ducks, supplying a beverage cooler for the workers, organizing the workers, and making sure everyone gets lunch. In addition to all this, it is not unusual to see Marshalls running their own dog(s) in the test as well.

The obvious work of the Marshall is to keep the dogs and handlers in some semblance of order, with the ultimate goal of never keeping the judges waiting. This is not easy, and with some AKC hunt tests becoming increasingly popular, the test entries can become very large, which makes the Marshall's job even more difficult. This person, then, is one to cultivate as a friend and do your best not to annoy. How should the newcomer proceed?

First of all, arrive early. Go to the headquarters (every club has their own version) and pick up your catalog. Check to make sure that you and your dog are entered and identify the stake you have been assigned to. There is usually a friendly face nearby who can direct you to your stake's location. Drive to your destination and identify the Marshall. The most obvious clue will be the clipboard the Marshall will be holding. Beware, sometimes Marshalls put the clipboards down and pretend to melt into the crowd. In this case, just know that ultimately they will resume proper clipboard position, so watch carefully. Also, you will know it is the Marshall if a bevy of handlers start encircling someone. A bit of etiquette now takes place and it can be subject to the Marshall's whim. Most often, you will approach the Marshall and announce that you are present, for example: "I'm here to sign in dog number 4." The Marshall makes a notation on the sheet and will presume that you will be ready to run your dog as close to catalog order as possible. Occasionally, a Marshall may be preoccupied and will ask you to wait to sign in. If so, you must continue to monitor the Marshall carefully. Some may ultimately announce: "I'm ready for sign-in." Others may proclaim that they will begin sign-in after the test dog runs. There are even a few who never say anything. Do not despair. Observe as other handlers arrive. Once you witness handler/Marshall swarming activity, you know that sign-up has begun. The AKC sign-up method is fairly civilized in that you can expect to run your dog fairly close to catalog order. A brief melee occurs during UKC sign-ups, as it is done on a first-come, first-served basis: handlers get to pick their dogs' running order, so the first handler to the Marshall will get prime running order spots. UKC test entries are limited as well, so oftentimes you will see an eraserboard situated near the first holding blind that allows you to monitor the running order process yourself. This frees up the Marshall to assist more actively with the test itself.

Once an AKC test starts, the most common approach is for the Marshall to sign handlers up in "running order." That is, if you are dog number 4 in the catalog, then your dog will be the 4th

dog judged. However, life can't be that simple. You see, there are entities called pros and multiple handlers. These people may have several dogs entered in your stake and in other stakes as well. They may be fit in to accommodate the needs of other judges who may be waiting for them. This is absolutely nothing to get upset about. This is where the sportsmanship part of the game comes into play. Try your best to be flexible about any changes, even though you may be nervous about the test itself.

Immediately after the test dog is run, the Marshall will announce a short running order, such as: "Dog number 1 to the line, dog number 2 to the holding blind, dogs 3 and 4 get ready." The Marshall must now prevent lapses in judging time by keeping the dogs and handlers moving. Should you need to leave your stake before you've run your dog, be sure to inform the Marshall as to your whereabouts. Most Marshalls nowadays are equipped with two-way radios to communicate with other stakes and they will try to track you down when you need to get back to run your dog. If you are not present and they cannot find you when the other dogs have finished running, you may be "placed on the clock" by the judges. They will typically give you 15 minutes to appear. If you do not, you will not be allowed to run your dog.

A word to the wise: if you are likely to run early, make sure your dog is well-aired even before the test dog runs. This way, if you are called to the line earlier than you expect, both you and your dog will be prepared. When you sign in, ask the Marshall which handler will be running immediately before you. You can then watch for that person's preparations to go to the holding blind and know that you will be next in line. No matter what type of test, make sure you tell the judges your dog's catalog number and not its running order number as you approach the line.

You will check back with the Marshall for any changes in running order, or to inquire as to the progress of the test. After each series, the judges will determine which dogs they'd like to see again and will give a list of these to the Marshall, who will call out the numbers (the whole process is called call-backs). Go to the Marshall if you have any questions. The Marshall can convene with the judges as necessary. The Marshall will also announce the location of subsequent series.

There is one major error that the Marshall might make, which is to direct you to go to the holding blind and then ask you to leave it so that another handler and dog can run before you. This is the one instance when you will politely inform the Marshall that the rules state that once you are in the blind, you cannot be pulled. Stand your ground. It is unfair to both you and your dog to do anything differently. Remember, though, it's all about the blind. If the Marshall has asked you to get ready but you have not yet entered the blind, the Marshall still may ask to let someone run ahead of you. They usually have a good reason for the request and you may want to make an allowance out of good manners.

As you can see, marshalling is not for the faint-hearted, but it is a job that every club member should take on at some point. As you become more involved in the sport, you will recognize the differences between the novice Marshall and the veteran Marshall. Both will make mistakes! But you may hope to see fewer with the latter. Regardless, be respectful of the duties they have taken on and forgiving of the inevitable blunders that can occur. Some day, you may be asked to be a Marshall. It can be an enjoyable experience, and it is a great way to meet all the handlers and watch many a dog. Best wishes on your Marshall encounters!