

TRAINING

TRAIL HANDLING HINTS

“Putting on a Show”

By Dean Brunn

Most trial people join the game for the same reasons; the joy of hunting and outdoor activities, the exhilaration of a good hunt, the thrill of great dog work, and the love of our Spaniels. And we desire and enjoy the competition. All trialers dream of having a great trial and being “top dog” one weekend. To some degree we all harbor the desire to win. You look for the right dog, spend lots of time and money, train hard and travel. You’re looking for the winning combination. When judging I try not to judge a handler but rather the work of the dog. In truth, what is being judged is performance. In no other type of dog trial is the handler more responsible for the quality of the performance than in the Springer trial. From the time you turn him loose until the judge says ‘thank you’, you are running the show.

To be a winner a dog needs to be solid in all aspects. He needs to have good pace and style, have a good pattern, and be a good birdfinder. He should be well mannered, be a good marker and have a good mouth. No major faults. To be a big winner he needs to do all these and be exceptional in at least one aspect. He might have a great nose, be a real exciting bird finder, or be exceptional in pace and style. As a trainer and a handler, your job is to accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.

The advantage of being in the first brace is that you get to start with a clean fresh course and you won’t have to follow along forever with your dog. Among the disadvantages is you lose the chance to go out and “scout the conditions.” By this I mean seeing where the course goes, the type of cover and terrain, the scenting and wind conditions, and the bird planting conditions. Having some understanding of these things can be a great advantage. When I go to the line I want to be as knowledge-able about

the conditions as possible.

My first priority is to get the job done. Find a couple of birds, be efficient, keep the dog out of trouble, generally just to have a nice clean series and let the dogs training and his ability be the show. At times and under certain conditions I’ll try to “go for it.” I want the dog to really open up. I want good things to happen, give ‘em a really good performance. However, as a handler you can’t make it happen. Your limited by the conditions and situations as they are presented. You need to be aware and in control, but don’t try to force it, let the dogs work be the show.

I think it’s important to start a series with a good first cast. A cast that starts the dog in a good pattern and puts him in a position to use the wind. An impressive first cast can really get a judge’s attention and that’s always important. A dogs pattern and use of the wind is of the utmost importance to his success in a trial. I’ll write more on how to get that good first cast in the next issue.

In a brace, a dogs pattern should enable him to find birds from the centerline to a point from 10 to 20 yards outside your wing gun. Birds outside your wing gun might not be considered “on your beat,” but producing birds there within gun range is very much to your advantage. In the third series the dogs pattern should be extended so he can find birds outside either wing gun.

When running an upwind course it is simply a matter of the dog working back and forth in a pattern from the centerline to a point outside the wing gun. Depending on the scenting conditions, he should work 5 to 20 yards in front of the line between the handler and the guns.

On a downwind course the dog should work the same type of a back and forth



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pattern but maintain a distance greater in front of the handler and guns. I prefer to have a dog work a rectangle or oval shaped pattern with the front edge of the rectangle 20 to 30 yards in front of me and the back edge 5 to 15 yards from me. This allows the dog two or three chances to cover the ground with his nose before I get to it. Thirty yards in front of you isn’t too far when going downwind as long as you can see the dog. Generally the action will come back at you. Also, a dog that stays too flat will only get one chance before you’re by a bird, unless you are going at a snails pace.

In all types of wind the bird finding part of a dog’s pattern will usually be when the dog is running perpendicular to the wind or as close to perpendicular as possible while he’s angling across it. This is why all dogs

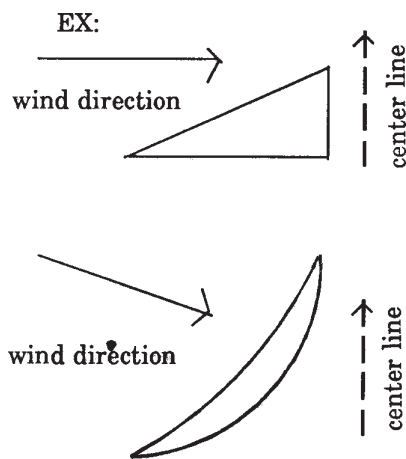
have a natural instinct to pattern across the wind. It's especially important to remember this when running on some type of a crosswind course.

In a crosswind (or near cross-wind) I like the dog to run a triangle shaped, or banana pattern.

The bird finding parts of these patterns would be the downwind side near the centerline and when he's angling back to the upwind gun. These would be the areas where his nose is best covering his beat. The dog should be able to "punch out" on the downwind side 25 to 30 yards in front and then angle back, to just in front of the upwind gun.

Knowing the conditions and your dog's ability, and having or letting him run the proper wind pattern allows you to get the job done efficiently and without unnecessarily having him cover the ground over and over. It also makes for a sharper and more interesting performance.

Another important thing is having you and the dog maintain a proper distance from the centerline. A dog's normal beat will usually cover from 25 to 40 yards from the stakeline. Different dogs and different conditions will make it vary, but I usually



like to walk approximately 20 yards from the center. I don't like to feel too close, but I especially don't want to be too wide, even with a dog that I'm worried might poach. We're responsible for the birds on our side of the beat and that usually means having the dog cover up to the center. By walking too wide you'll either not let the dog cover the ground near the center, or, if he does, you'll be too far from him to have control if he starts heading over. Also, by keeping myself more in line with where the birds have been planted, I can better see that he is properly covering the beat. The distance

the dog works from the centerline will depend on the wind and scenting conditions.

On up and downwind courses the dog will need to physically cover from the center-line to the wing to be able to find all the birds for which he's responsible. On the upwind side of a crosswind course, the side of the triangle pattern should be at or very near the stakeline. On the downwind side the dog won't need to run to the stakeline. He's covering it with his nose. How close he gets will depend on conditions, his nose, and how much confidence you have in him. But remember, you are responsible for the birds on your beat. More birds are passed near the stake line than any other area on the course.

No one can tell you how to learn to read your dog when he's making bird. This is something you can only learn from experience and paying attention. Every dog reacts differently, but a good handler must absolutely be able to read his dog. This is essential to be able to take advantage of positive situations and in avoiding problems and negative situations.

One of the most common problems is distinguishing between bird and bird planter scent. Usually a dog doesn't so much indicate the planter as he does the bird scent on the planter or feathers that come out when he pulls a bird from his vest. This commonly creates a problem when they plant by walking in off the upwind side of a course. As he starts to walk in he pulls a bird from his vest and some feathers and droppings come out with the bird and fall to the ground. He then continues another 10 or 20 yards and plants the bird. When the dog gets to the plant he catches a whiff of bird and rushes in; but maybe he's a little off line or the bird moved a bit. As the dog goes by the plant instead of hooking back to find the bird he smells the scent from the bird planter and continues upwind. You rush after him and walk up the bird! And, the judge turns and says "sorry, next dog." Usually the difference between bird scent and the scent from the bird planter is less intensity, and the dog's head will start to rise higher.

Anytime a dog makes game it is important not to rush in on him, but to give him room to work out the bird. Some handlers seem to want to be right on top of the action. They rush in on the dog when he makes game and continue to walk towards the dog after the bird is flushed. Judges expect the dog to be steady; the **handler** should be also. Usually the dog isn't even aware of the handler moving up; but if he is,

you can make him edgy or take away from his concentration on the mark. Often the handler blocks the gun and makes his job more difficult. And it can be annoying to a judge who has you right there to tap you, but has to keep going to stay in touch.

We all find ourselves in the situation where our dogs are running out of gas and there are birds to find and more ground to cover. Most handlers think this is the time to give their dogs lots of water to drink. It isn't! When a dog is out hunting all day it's important he drink often to replenish body fluids, just like any long-distance athlete. But even an extremely long series in a trial won't last more than 30 minutes. Compare the dog with an athlete running a 2 or 3 mile race. What would the runner's time be for the second half of the race if he stopped at the halfway point and drank a big glass of water...? Probably not too good. Splash a little water on his head, chest, or belly, and maybe just enough to rinse out his mouth.

Probably the most important thing is to keep his motor running. I've seen dogs really tired who were still running and patterning well. Then you have to stop; a pickup, an honor, dog change on the other side, etc. The handler calls the dog to him, gives him some water and has him sit there and wait. At first the dog's motor is running, he's still alert and attentive, but as he sits there he shuts the motor off. You can see it. He becomes less alert, he slumps and relaxes. Now the judge says carry on, and you can't get him going again. At best, he lumbers through a couple poor casts before he gets it going again. I avoid this by giving him a little water on the head or none at all, and then having him sit and wait at least 15 feet from me. By having him sit away from me he stays attentive and he watches me. He anticipates running some more and keeps the motor running. Having a dog sit away from you can also be beneficial at the beginning of a series. When he's out there his attention will usually be riveted on you in anticipation. Often when a dog sits next to the handler, he's looking everywhere but at the handler. Obviously having his attention is a big part of the game.

One last tip in order to be a good handler you need to be able to see your series as others see it. We all suffer from 'kennel vision' (see no evil, etc.). Above all be honest with yourself. Part of being able to have a great series is knowing when they're not so good and working to make them better.

Better trialing and good luck to all!

Send your specific problems and questions to ON THE LINE.