

LINE UP THAT DOG!

Suggestions to Maximize Your Chance of a Successful Retrieve

By John Bulger, Janet Ciarico, and Linda Reynolds

We had a very successful club training session recently. After the session concluded and we had cleaned up, stowed the gear, and were sitting around enjoying beverages and snacks, a few of the more experienced in the group were commenting on the surprising number of handlers that were attempting to line up their dogs for a mark by leaning over and pointing to the area of the gun stations using their hand, either at the side or to the front of their dog's head. We weren't sure where they had learned or developed this method, but we unanimously agreed that it was not helpful for the dog and more than likely distracted and confused the dog. The handlers' objective was good, but the method was not. Unfortunately, as is common with group training days, time did not permit thorough teaching on lining dogs up for marks. In this article, I suggest a method I use to help my dogs have success, and I also provide other points on lining that are useful for hunt tests and field trials.

First, the term "lining" has several meanings when handling dogs in the field. It can mean having the dog go directly to a mark without deviation, correction, or hunting, or taking a direct line to the bird, which is something we all strive for in training. Lining can also mean to show the dog the locations of the gun stations in a field trial or working certificate test. This is done by stepping to the line and giving your dog some cues to look out and find the relevant gun stations before you begin the test. However, beware that this is only allowed in field trials and working tests; showing your dog the placement of marks is NOT permitted in an AKC hunt test. In fact, it is specifically against the rules and may cause you to be excused early. Lastly, lining can refer to positioning the whole dog, from nose to tail, in the direction of a mark or blind. Taking special care to do this improves the dog's chances of having a successful retrieve. This last example is my focus in this article.

Properly lining up the dog to retrieve a mark gives him a jump start on the correct path to the bird. To do this in training, first make sure your dog is sitting quietly next to you. Then, stand square to the mark or blind, being sure that your dog is aligned carefully from nose to tail in the direction of the mark. So why not help by leaning over to show him the right direction? Because the action is a distraction and in all likelihood will cause your dog to turn his head away from where you actually want him to look. Leaning also tends to push the dog away from you on release. Additionally, many judges consider leaning over the dog to be a form of intimidation, getting you a warning or even excused from a test. The first step toward ensuring your dog goes directly to a mark is to line him up properly to the mark. So, how do you convince your dog to line for success? The answer is good technique, then consistently training the technique each time you work your dog. With lots of practice and repetition in properly lining up your dog, you will be well on your way to instilling in your dog the "muscle memory" for good habits both in lining up for marks and blinds, and in running straight.

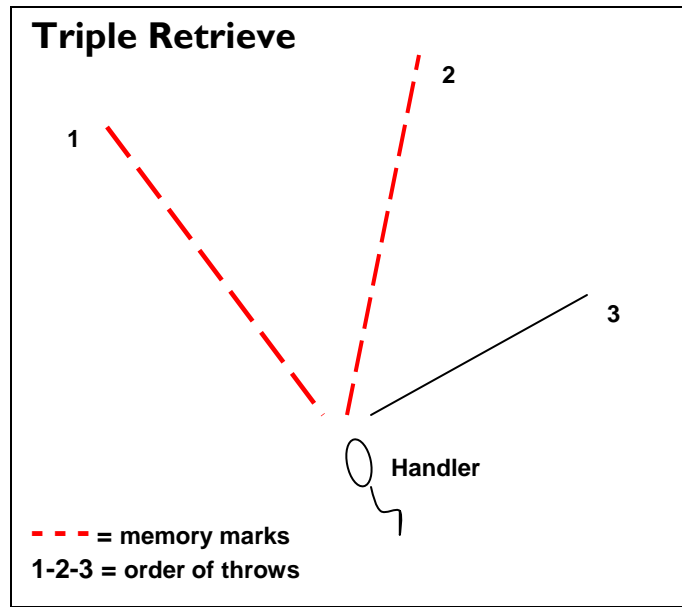
Developing and practicing good technique starts with how you come to the line. As you exit the holding blind to come to the line, heel the dog in the direction of the retrieve. Once at the line, set yourself and your dog directly facing the mark you want your dog to retrieve. Stand squarely facing the mark; then look down and check the alignment of the dog's spine with the line to the bird. Make sure his spine is lined up directly to the mark. If your dog has trouble looking out or is distracted, have the gun blow a duck call or give a "hey-hey" to get the dog's attention (more on this in "Troubleshooting" below). Once your dog is sitting quietly and aligned accurately, signal that you are ready for the mark. If you are carrying a gun, point the gun in the direction you expect the bird (or bumper) to fall.

In the case of a multiple retrieve, your objective is for the dog to pivot slightly with you to watch each mark thrown, but not so much as to disturb the dog's focus on the marks as they fall. In a triple retrieving test, for instance, a dog must be "steady" at the line and "mark" the fall of three birds. He is not to leave to retrieve until released by the judge and sent by the handler. How will you help ensure that your dog gets the best look at the birds? To start, align yourself and dog centrally between the marks with a slight emphasis toward the memory mark(s).

In the example at right, three marks are falling left to right across the field, which makes the left-most mark and center mark your “memory marks”, or those your dog will need to remember to retrieve. By lining up your dog slightly to the left of center, your dog will get a clear view of these marks, helping to set them into memory, while also easily “marking” bird number 3, or the “go bird” and first to be retrieved.

After the first mark has fallen, let the dog focus on the mark; then pivot your body slightly onto the next mark as those guns shoot and the mark is thrown. If the gun station sounds a duck call, pivot to the next mark at the time of the call. As your dog becomes seasoned at multiple marks, you will only need to pivot slightly and your dog will respond by moving his head to the next mark. Before you release the dog to retrieve each mark, take a last check to be sure he is lined accurately.

If he is not, take a moment to correct his alignment, and then send him with the word you use to release him, (his name, fetch, etc.). As he returns to the line with each bird, have yourself already aligned with the next mark in the series. Ask your dog to heel, take the bird, and then take the time to align him with the next mark, whether running singles, or before releasing him on multiple marks. Repeat this process for each mark. It takes a little practice on your part but if you are consistent in this technique each time your dog does a mark, it will become second nature for you both.



TROUBLESHOOTING

Adjust alignment with “heel” and “here”. Now, let’s talk about some troubleshooting issues in aligning your dog. To adjust your dog’s alignment, use the “heel” and “here” commands he knows from obedience training. For those of you whose dogs work from your left side, if he is angled too far to the right (or toward you), move him back into alignment by saying “heel.” This should get him to swing his rear toward you and his front away from you. If he is aligned too far to the left, say “here”, drawing his front to your leg. A gentle pat on your thigh might help direct him. During training use a tab on his collar to gently guide him into place to help him understand what you’re asking him to do until he responds correctly. It’s important to make sure you have the dog aligned correctly before the marks fall. Don’t try to align his position as the marks are coming down — this may cause confusion for the dog.

Have the gun help. If your dog is ignoring the gun station for a mark, have the bird boy stand up to get your dog’s attention, or make some noise by calling “hey, hey” or using the duck call to get the dog’s attention. If you’ve already aligned the dog and he moves before the mark is thrown or when a mark is in the air, use the tab to bring him into alignment. If you use these tools consistently during training, and practice using drills to pivot with the “here” and “heel” commands (see more on this below), he will start to automatically adjust his alignment with the pivot.

Other ways to get the dog to look out. You may have a problem with the dog looking away from the mark because a previous mark or other object or noise attracts him. Work on convincing him to look straight out by saying “leave it” or “no” to the distraction and repeating your cue to “mark.” In training, don’t spend too much time with an uncooperative dog. If he doesn’t line up with a few “heel’s”, and “here’s”, move forward a step or two and try to realign him. If that doesn’t work, have the gunner at the station stand up/out, or give a “hey, hey” or honk on the duck call to attract your dog’s focus. If this doesn’t convince him, take him off line briefly, then repeat the process after a dog or two.

Guiding is not permitted in a test. While guiding your dog during training is necessary to teach him what is correct, be aware that guiding your dog in a *test* as the marks are going down is *not allowed*. Once you signal for the marks in a test, you must remain silent and not touch your dog until the judges give the

release, so aligning your dog as the marks are falling may disqualify you, certainly if you give him a verbal command.

Checking alignment. Let's talk more about correct alignment. To be aligned correctly to the mark, your dog's spine should line directly to the mark. This is a sure way to know he is accurately on target. How do you check alignment of the dog's spine? This takes some practice. In training try holding a heeling stick over the dog's backbone, back far enough so he doesn't see it, and check where it is pointing. Then make the adjustment if needed. After a while you won't need the heeling stick. If you're perpendicular to the line to the object, and he's square to you, he'll be lined up correctly. If you are training with a group, have a training group buddy check alignment for both you and your dog. After a while you won't need the training buddy.

Wagon wheel lining drill. The wagon wheel drill is very effective tool to help train alignment at all levels. Even experienced dogs need to tune up their muscle memory from time to time! To start, stand with your dog in a central point on mowed grass and toss white bumpers about 10 yards out in a circle as you move "around the clock," about every 45 degrees (visualize the face of a clock and toss the bumpers at 12, 3, 6, and 9). You want the dog to see the bumpers from where the two of you are standing. Line yourself and the dog carefully on one bumper and release him. If he fails to go to the correct bumper, stop him with a "no," call him back, realign him and send him again. When he does retrieve the correct bumper, stand square to the retrieved bumper as the dog returns to heel. Take the bumper and then toss it back from the spot it was picked up. As the dog looks at the bumper you tossed back, tell him "no," and then pivot to line up on the next bumper. If the dog is too distracted by the bumper you tossed back, just hold on to it rather than tossing it back. Then pivot to the opposite bumper in the circle (180 degrees away) and line up for this retrieve. Be sure to stand square to the bumper and line the dog carefully before sending him. As you and your dog get better at the drill, toss the bumpers further out from the center and add more bumpers between the ones you have been practicing. It's a simple drill you can do at home to work when you can't be out with a group training.

Lining over a jump. I've also had good success with a drill I developed. I put out a pile of bumpers about 100 yards out from the line. I place an agility or obedience jump with the cross bar low (16") about 75 yards from the line. The line, jump, and pile need to be in line. I introduce the jump and teach the dog to go over it from a very short distance. Then I slowly increase the distance from where you send the dog to the jump, working back in 10- or 15-yard increments sending each time to the pile over the jump. If he tries to go around the jump, stop him, bring him back to the starting point, and send him again. If necessary, shorten the distance to the jump again until he reliably goes over each time and then work distance incrementally again. Each successful retrieve builds that muscle memory, and also teaches him to take a straight line and not to cheat obstacles.

What about that hand? Many trainers use the hand in their release at the line for a mark while others say it is not necessary and can be a distraction. Those who use it generally do so to send only for the "go bird" or perhaps a long mark. However, in the field, the hand is not used to point the way. Instead, give your dog the verbal cue to "mark" to show what you expect, and then give your dog the responsibility of looking in the field for the mark while lining him up. If you want to use the hand for a "release" to the mark, quietly place your hand directly over your dog's head slightly forward of his ears so he sees it peripherally, and then release him. Watch other experienced handlers use their hands; this will give you a good visual of how to use the hand for the release.

Remember that practice makes perfect! Be consistent in this training at every session. Don't believe that just because he is looking at the next mark but isn't lined up properly that he will go to the correct mark. Chances are he'll go in the direction his spine is pointing and not for the mark! With practice and lining drills he will develop the knowledge to look out at a gunner prior to the mark and the muscle memory to truly follow the line on which you set him. With that muscle memory he'll run straight and true and you'll have a dynamite marker in no time!

Have fun, train often, and stay safe!