

Field and Feather

The Retrieving Game

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Two-sided heeling

You may have noticed that some field dogs heel on either side. This is another tool used to help the dog remember complicated set-ups of multiple marks, and to help queue the dog for which bird you want it to retrieve next.

There are lots of things that happen in transition training for field dogs. The basic rule for multiple marks is that the dog retrieves the last bird down, and then the rest in reverse order. For example, with a double, the dog picks up the last bird down (the “go” bird) returns, and the handler sends the dog for the first bird down (the “memory” bird).

With a triple retrieve, a new concept is introduced called secondary selection. This means that instead of the reverse order, the handler instructs the dog to pick the marks up in a different order. For example, a triple is thrown right to left. That means the first bird down is on the right, then the next bird down is somewhat in the middle and the last bird down—the “go” bird—is on the left. With secondary selection, the dog gets the “go” bird and returns to the handler. Instead of going for the second bird down (the middle bird), the handler sends the dog for the last bird down, which is the bird on the right. This “outside, outside middle” approach requires that the dog can be pulled off of that second bird and be sent for the right, outside bird. The other way to refer to this is picking up the “go bird,” then the next shortest bird (usually the other outside bird) and then the middle bird (last to pick up).

If your dog has been trained to heel on either side, this can be used to further help queue the dog for which bird to pick up next.

Here’s an example:

The set-up is a triple. The “memory” bird is thrown from left to right. The middle bird is thrown left to right. The last bird, the “go” bird, is thrown left to right. The dog would come to the line on the RIGHT side of the handler, because the “go” bird is thrown to the right. When the dog returns with the first bird, the dog heels on the LEFT side to pick up the outside bird thrown to the LEFT. When the dog returns for the “memory” bird, the dog would also heel on the LEFT because that bird was thrown to the left.

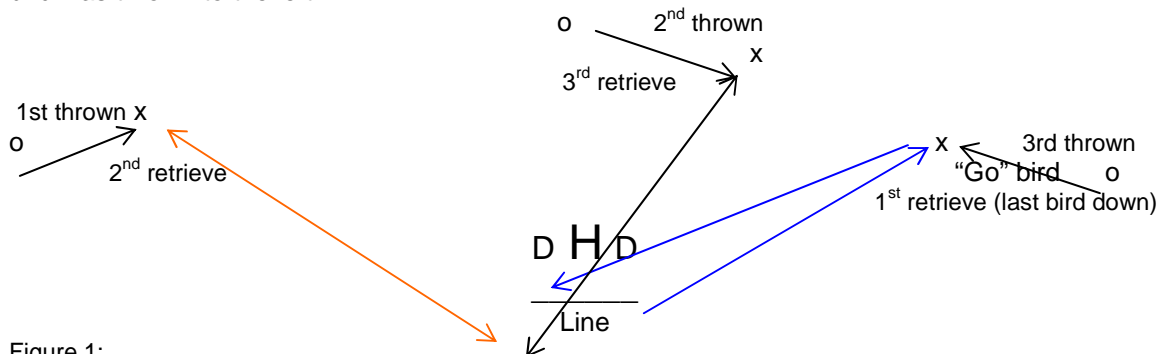


Figure 1:

H=handler D= dog

Dog starts out on the RIGHT for the “go” bird because the bird is thrown from the right.

Dog returns to the LEFT side to set up for the retrieve of the outside bird (far left) and then the middle bird, both thrown from the left.

This type of fine-tuning allows you to help the dog remember the picture of the set-up better, and helps tell the dog which mark to pick up next. Scarlett, my MH, was so well-trained by her professional trainer that she will come back with a bird and automatically go to the correct side for the next mark. All I have to do is receive the birds!

OK. So you want to train your dog to heel on either side. I always start with the conventional left-sided heeling. Once the young dog understands that concept, I work on heeling from the right side. At first, I will step to the other side of the dog, give the "heel" command and then work the dog with sits and about turns, etc. like you would normally. This may be hard for a well-trained obedience dog because you have spent so much time teaching that the "heel" position is ONLY on the left. Once the dog can heel comfortably on either side, I introduce the "finish" or heel from the front position to either side. The signal to the dog is simply placing your right or left hand out by your side. So a "heel" left means you put your right hand down at your left side and slightly out to queue the dog to swing to that side. A "heel" right means you put your right hand out by your side. The dog goes to the side you indicate and sits by your side. **THIS DOES NOT WORK** with an "around" finish. It must be a flip finish into the heel position for either side.

Once you can get the dog to swing either direction by your hand signal, you can put it together with fieldwork. As your dog is coming back with the bird, stop the dog in the "front" position with a "sit" whistle. Then use your hand signal and "heel" to tell the dog which way to swing. Eventually, you will be able to just use the hand signal as the dog is returning with the bird without the front sit and the dog will heel on the desired side.

Then once your dog understands heeling both sides, you can begin to help it understand the significance of the position to the actual retrieve. I was taught to start young dogs in the field by placing them on the appropriate side for retrieves (based on the direction of the throw) from the very beginning. Then putting this together with returning to either side is a simple transition later.

Like most new concepts we train, it takes lots of repetition and consistency for the dog to understand. However, it will become automatic for you and the dog—and you will see the benefits in the field.

Happy Training!

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