

Field and Feather
The Retrieving Game
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Why are “blinds” so hard?

So why **ARE** blinds so hard? For starters, it is an abstract concept that is hard for us to “explain” to our dogs. It also works against the dog’s natural abilities of scenting and hunting up the game. We are asking our dogs to set aside their instincts, and let us drive. Add to that a very birdy dog or a very confident dog (I KNOW where the bird is!!), and you could have a battle on your hands.

The transition from pattern blinds (known blinds) to cold blinds is subtle but substantial. I am not qualified to provide this information to you—best to go to the pros who are published and have years of success to back up their techniques. There are many good books and articles that give step-by-step instructions on how to make this transition. I will just share some observations and tips from my experience.

The blind training we do is the first place to apply the collar techniques (such as indirect pressure), whistle and hand commands that we have taught in the yard. And it is often where we find the holes in our training. If your dog didn’t sit crisply during “double-T” or other pile work, it will get worse when you move the concept to field work. The loops get bigger; the sits get slower and more crooked. We also have to keep in mind our body language—whether the hand signal we are giving is the correct one, and is clear enough for the dog to see it and understand what is being asked.

And if the dog is nuts about birds, catching scent of a bird can often make a dog go temporarily deaf. That’s a good reason to use bumpers instead of birds for some dogs. However, with other dogs that are not confident about being handled, knowing a bird is the prize may make a huge difference in attitude. Decisions, decisions.

And most importantly it is a time when we handlers can get VERY frustrated. This is often when handlers use too much pressure, and often at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. Timing is so critical and it takes lots of experience to anticipate the dog and get the whistle command or collar pressure just right. I have learned that when I am frustrated with lack of progress, that is NOT the time to continue a session on blinds. It is time to walk away, do something fun and positive for the dog—like some marks—and call it quits for the day. The more aggravated and frustrated we get, the more anxious our dogs get and we can both make wrong decisions.

So part of our challenge is to be very skilled at reading our dogs. We need to know when they are confused, showing signs of stress and when pressure is not the right approach. This can be very hard to do—sometimes you need the help of another, more

objective set of eyes to help you make this determination. This is a great time to have a mentor who has successfully trained different types of dogs. If you don't have a mentor, ask other owners and training buddies what they have run into with their dogs and what solutions they found. And always keep in mind your dog's temperament. What works for your buddy's dog may not work for yours. Sift through the information you get and determine what fits your situation the best.

I am working with a dog that is very sensitive, so adding collar pressure is not the solution for him. He will just shut down, or ignore me completely and start running around frantically looking for the bird. So, with him I have had to back off, not use collar pressure. Instead, I am using lots of repetition, and confidence building exercises. Hopefully we will get his level of confidence to the point where he can trust me and learn to work together, instead of against each other.

It makes a huge difference for him to use ducks out there instead of bumpers. However, if he winds the duck, game over. He will **not** sit on a whistle once he has winded the bird. As a hunting dog a strong nose is a good trait, but as a hunt test dog, the judges want to see control, trainability and teamwork. It is hard for some dogs to walk on both sides of that line.

But when we get it right, when everything clicks, it is a sight to behold. The dog spins, sits, and locks in on the handler. The handler gives the proper hand signal and body language to transmit the message. The dog turns, follows the cast and finds the bird. Ahhh. Perfection.

When it happens, savor it. Heaven knows we will all have our share of "Hail Mary" backs when things don't go right (this is when the handler gets flustered and puts BOTH arms up in a desperate attempt to get the dog to take the "back" command).

Happy training!

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