



## Starting Retired Guns by Danny Farmer & Judy Aycock

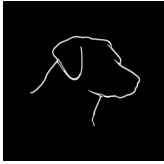
If you remember, the single most important issue when starting doubles is not to allow *any* movement by the dog other than turning his head to follow each mark. The handler should do the moving, stepping up (pushing) or stepping back (pulling), to turn the dog's head and attention, depending on which gunner he is trying to help the dog see.

Pushing and pulling are techniques used throughout a dog's life on both marks and blinds. It is much harder, if not impossible, to influence the dog with push and pull if the dog does not remain sitting in place. If your dog creeps (moves forward), then you must move forward to be in position to push or pull; the dog will then tend to move forward again in response. You can see this is a no-win situation. Because the ability to influence your dog with push and pull is so important throughout your dog's career, it is vital to maintain a very high standard on not allowing your dog to move forward on line. This applies to both marks and blinds. If your dog moves forward and you heel him back into position, you are *not* teaching him not to creep you are just teaching him to heel back. To teach him not to creep, you must correct him at the very first sign of forward movement with a "sit" command. Use of pressure on the "sit" command should depend on the dog. One reason we are spending so much time on this issue is that it is one area where is much easier to establish a good habit of steadiness than it is to correct a dog that has been allowed to move on line.

A Huge part of trialing is the use of retired guns. These are gunners or throwers who, once they have thrown the mark, bird or bumper, will move out of view of the dog (retire), usually behind a holding blind or any object in the field large enough to be out of the dog's sight. They will stay retired until the dog has retrieved the mark. We tend to start retiring guns very early in a dog's marking life. If started early, a dog accepts retired guns quite easily. Because a dog doesn't mark like a person marks, retiring a gun does not usually pose much of a problem.

Let me explain. We use points of reference to mark. The gunner is our most easily recognized point of reference. We also use obstacles near the mark, a big rock, tree or bush, even saying the mark is in line with the second phone pole in the distance.

But dogs tend to mark with an innate sense of where a bird is located, like a canine GPS. If you throw a mark next to an obvious bush and remove that bush, you and I might not know where that bird is; but a good marking dog will not be bothered by the missing bush.



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We try to train the dog to mark like a human by emphasizing the gunner as a point of reference. We correct the dog if he goes on the “wrong” side of a gunner; we tend to do this because we assume a dog marks like we do. If a person were to go out to pick up a mark, he would rarely, if ever, go on the wrong side of the gunner because he would relate the mark to being on either to right or the left of the gunner. So why does a dog often go to the wrong side of a gunner but then quickly go to the bird? It is because the gunner is not his natural point of reference. We teach him to use the gunner as a point of reference.

So, to get back to our discussion of retired guns, if you start retiring guns early in his training, on singles, before we have taught the dog to mark off the gun, using the gun as a reference point as we would the dog is not bothered too much. Once the dog has had enough marks to know something about how to hunt and an idea of marking, you can start retiring the gun by just having the gun step behind a tree, haybale, holding blind, etc. Have the gun retire very close to where he was standing when he threw the bird so that he can easily step out and help the dog if needed. The gun should retire as soon as he throws the bird. Do this on both long and short marks.

When starting to introduce retired guns (on singles), send the dog before the gun steps out of sight. As the dog becomes comfortable with no visible gunner, you can start holding the dog for a couple of seconds before sending him. If you start retiring guns early in the dog’s training, I think you will find they are not bothered by them. If you have problems, remember to simplify and always keep the dog’s attitude positive.