

So You've Been Asked to Throw - That's easy... Isn't it?

Steps to becoming a more effective thrower in the field

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If you've ever joined a group of retriever enthusiasts for a day of field training, you've likely been asked to take your turn throwing for the others. You know how to do this, right? You grab a bag of bumpers or birds and make the trek through cover, over uneven ground in the hot sun or cold spitting rain out to the gun station and wait for the first dog to appear on line. You may see it as a mindless, thankless job, but there's more to it than meets the eye.

Don't look at it as just taking your turn out there. An experienced thrower is an indispensable asset to any training session, and is particularly important for helping dogs develop the skills necessary to become good markers. This is also a great opportunity to watch dogs and handlers work from a unique perspective. You get to see up close and personal how factors such as wind, terrain, water and cover affect the dogs. You will learn to distinguish between a teaching mark for less experienced dogs, and a well-placed, hard to come up with mark for advanced dogs. You will notice how different handlers cue their dogs and how the dogs respond. What you learn as a thrower can help you become a better handler and trainer of your own dog.

Before taking your position in the field, you should know what the group expects you to wear. Hunt tests require throwers and handlers to wear camouflage or other dark colored clothing, and many groups want everyone in traditional hunting attire. Field trial and WC / WCX gunners wear white or light colored clothing, so some groups will insist on all throwers in white jackets. White jackets help the dog identify the gun station more easily, allowing them to focus on the throw. In training, this enables handlers to work on specific concepts rather than wondering whether the dog saw the gunner or not. Groups who switch over to camouflage a week or two before a test usually find that the dogs adjust amazingly well once the concepts have been taught and are firmly engrained.

On your way out to the gun station, avoid dragging the bag of birds through the tall grass. Hold it high to avoid leaving a scent trail that may help or hinder the dogs. You can also use this opportunity to identify any potential hazards to the dogs on the way out to the gun station or in the area of the expected fall. Some hazards to watch for are holes, vertical sticks, broken glass, shot-up aluminum cans. You can usually find some longer sticks or small logs to place upright in holes so the dog will run around them. Snakes like to sun themselves on or near rock piles. Watch for bees nests in trees, bushes or even in the ground, and ask about other hazards specific to the region.

Communication between throwers and handlers is extremely important. The best form of communication at a distance is two-way radios. These are simple to use, work on similar frequencies regardless of brand and many groups will have extras if you don't yet have your own. Training without radios can be done, but may require a lot of shouting in the field which can be distracting or confusing for the dogs, and aggravating for the people.

If you're using radios, keep non-essential discussions (social chatter) to a minimum to avoid distracting the working dog.

Another form of communication is the use of hand and arm signals, and it's useful to learn the specifics before going out to the gun station. Handlers will signal for the mark to be thrown, and you should be sure to wait for the signal. They may also have specific signals to ask for help of various kinds, such as noise and motion to attract the dog's attention, or an additional throw, or a faked throw. The timing for help is crucial, so the thrower should always pay close attention to the handler and the dog, and have another bird or bumper ready.

In addition to radios, other equipment that you may be asked to take out and use may include duck calls, a folding chair, a bag or bucket, a holding blind, a winger, ear protection and primer pistols or in some cases, popper guns. If you're unfamiliar with any of these items, especially the winger or the guns, don't be a hero—ask someone to demonstrate safe operation. Poppers (blanks) can cause severe injury to the operator and others. All guns should be treated as a loaded weapon—never pointed at anyone, or fired towards others. In some states, a firearm owner's ID is required to use shotguns even though you may not plan to use live shells.

You will likely have some free time while sitting out at a gun station. Use that time to make certain you have enough bumpers or birds and that primer pistols or popper guns are loaded and ready to fire before every dog comes to the line. Throws without a shot can be very frustrating for the working dog and their handler. Always try to keep your birds or bumpers in a bag or bucket to prevent the dog from being distracted, or stealing one from the gun station. If this happens, don't reprimand, intimidate, or try to get it back. You don't want to give the dog any reason to fear gunners in the field. Make sure the handler knows what happened, and chalk it up to experience.

A proper throw and bird placement are key elements of any mark. If you're not a great thrower, rest assured, you *will* get better with experience. Practicing aim, distance, arc and most effective style (underhand, overhand) away from the line and at home may be helpful. Ask for handlers at the line to watch you make a "practice throw," so they can inform you of any desired adjustments. If you do make a bad throw while training, don't pick it up unless directed to do so. Alternately, the handler may not say anything and simply heel their dog off line. At this point, pick up the mark and prepare to re-throw when the handler returns to the line and signals. Don't feel bad, even the best throwers make occasional bad throws. This can be good practice for "no-birds" at tests.

Throwing bumpers is relatively easy, since most bumpers have throw ropes with a knot at the end. Birds have no throw ropes, so throws will be considerably shorter. When throwing birds, there are several options. Grasping a bird by the head or neck is *not* a good choice, unless you want to keep the head as a souvenir after the body goes sailing off. If the bird is fresh or thawed, extend both wings straight up over the back, and grasp the tips in your throwing hand like a handle, using an underhand throwing motion. You can also hold one wing and use a sidearm throw, but the bird may deteriorate more

quickly. Another option is to hold it by the legs. If the birds are frozen, rest the bird in your palm and use either an underhand release or a big winding overhand delivery (my personal favorite). As with bumpers, throwing birds effectively and consistently takes practice.

Generally speaking, the farther your gun station is from the line, the more arc and distance is required to give the dog a good look at the throw. Arc refers to altitude or height over a distance. You may be asked to make a flat throw, an angle-back or an angle-in. As you stand facing the line, a “flat throw” is straight out to your side or perpendicular (90 degrees) to the line. An “angle-back” throw should be approximately 45 degrees back, so the dog has to pass the gun station to reach the mark. An “angle-in” throw would be 45 degrees toward the line so the dog doesn’t have to come all the way to the gun station to make the retrieve. It can be part of your field education to ask why a particular throw is desired in a set-up.

You might be asked to “salt the fall area” for less experienced dogs. This simply means to throw or place several bumpers or birds on the ground in the general area that you will be throwing to. This method is used to build confidence, since the dog does not have to hunt extensively for the mark after reaching the area. You should salt the area before the dog comes to the line.

Be aware of the background behind you at the gun station from the dog’s point of view at the line. If it’s a dark treeline or hillside, you may be asked to use white bumpers or tie white flagging on bumpers or birds. If you’re on top of a hill with clouds or open sky behind you, dark bumpers or flagging can be used. Your objective is to make the throw clearly visible for the dogs regardless of the background and conditions.

Before a dog arrives at the line, a thrower should know if the set-up will be run as singles or multiples, the order of the throws and whether the handler wants you to stay out, retire, or throw from a hidden position. Staying out means that the gunner stays visible to the dog until the mark is picked up. The handler may want you to remain standing, or may ask you to sit down, so long as you’re still visible from the line. Retired gunners throw, then disappear behind a holding blind or other hiding place. This is usually done only when the dog is returning from another mark in a multiple mark set-up. Gunners should not move when a dog is on line or running toward a mark as this may distract the dog. A hidden gunner is never visible to the dog. The dog sees only the throw and fall, so the arc, distance of the throw, and visibility are particularly important. It’s also helpful for the thrower to know the experience level of the dog, and what sort of help the handler anticipates might be needed. If you have a question, get on the radio and ask. The handler won’t mind—it’s in the best interest of the dog.

The sequence of events leading up to a throw is important. First, you should face the fall area and make sure you’re clearly visible to the dog (unless it’s a hidden gun situation). The most common sequence is to call (duck call or hey-hey), throw and then shoot while the bumper or bird is in the air. However, if the mark is at a longer distance (over 100 yards) or the working dog doesn’t have much experience, you may be asked to call and/or

wave your arms and shoot before the throw. This is done to ensure the working dogs have every opportunity to see and focus on the gunner and clearly see the throw. A good thrower watches the dog at the line and only throws once the handler has called for the throw and the dog is properly focussed.

The most important role the thrower has in the field is to help the dog in the right way when requested to do so. The Golden Rule of helping is: ***Be ready to help, but don't help unless requested. Then, help as little as possible but as much as necessary*** to assure a successful outcome for the dog. It's highly recommended to let dogs work things out on their own. You may be asked to intervene if the handler believes the dog has given up and is heading in, is leaving the area to go back to an "old fall" (area of a mark previously retrieved), or commits to "switching" to another mark not yet retrieved. Timing is extremely important, so pay attention and be ready if the handler requests your assistance. There also might be times when you need to let the handler know what the dog is doing, since you're likely to have a better vantage point than the handler. The only time you should intervene without being asked to, is if you believe the dog is in danger.

Knowing "how to help" is also crucial, and there are varying degrees of aid at your disposal. You might be asked just to simply stand up, wave your arms, call, walk towards the fall, fake a throw, pick up the mark and toss it, throw another, or any combination of these things. Keep your radio handy and listen for specific instructions from the handler.

Sometimes repeated throws are planned in advance when teaching long marks, water re-entries, or difficult factor-filled marks. The handler may prefer to signal for subsequent throws if needed, or leave it to the thrower's discretion, in which case the throws should be made while the dogs are still en-route to reinforce momentum - ***before*** they've stopped or turned to head back in. This scenario requires you to pay close attention to the dogs and the handlers, and be ready to react immediately.

So now you know that going out to throw a few birds can be more involved than you thought. Just remember, a good gunner gives the dogs a fair chance to do the best job possible in any situation. If you're lucky, you might get a little sun and healthy exercise to go along with the invaluable insight and knowledge you're sure to gain while out in the field throwing marks.