

Training, testing and running the SOLMS:

Proper training is the key to success

by Randy Blanchard



Farmers Insurance has a catchy series of commercials. They all end with my favorite phrase. “We know a thing or two because we’ve seen a thing or two.” Well, I’ve run enough tests under the DK system to know a thing or two. One thing that I’ve noticed is there are too many unprepared dogs running in the SOLMS. It’s the responsibility of the owner to make sure the dog is properly trained and ready to perform. This doesn’t have to be the case and this article is designed to assist in the successful training and running our DK dogs. All training should be positive and goal oriented. Here’s a saying that may help. The old pro who trained me made sure that this was stuck in my head:

“Training does not make perfect. Only perfect training makes Perfect.”

Before you start to train it’s important to understand the dynamics of the SOLMS and how to run. First, this is one of the few venues our organization has for our members to gather as a group. If your dog is ready to run, you can concentrate on establishing lasting friendship and having some fun. The SOLMS is the perfect opportunity to show case your well-trained dog to the DK community.

The next consideration is the judges. If there were no judges, there wouldn’t be a test. Judges spend a lot of time, effort and money to learn their trade. They are there to assist, judge and they want all dogs to pass. Dogs fail on their own merit. It’s understandable that an owner is disappointed when the dog fails. This emotion often materializes into anger which is sometimes directed towards the judges. This is always bad form and judges should be treated politely and with respect. If a participant is not happy with the result, review it with the judges and listen to their comments, then apply those comments to your future training. Use failure to become a better trainer.

Finally, there are the testing grounds to consider. Dogs are place oriented and may not preform well in an area that is new to them. Therefore, you should train in as many different areas as possible. If you can, it’s always a good idea to arrive at the test grounds one or two days before the test and get the dog use to the area. On the morning of the test move to an isolated area and let your dog retrieve the dead game you are going to use. Just do it a couple of times and

head off to the test. Helps to avoid problems and puts the dog into a good frame of mind.

Training for the SOLMS is not that difficult but it takes discipline and concentration. You must be in a training mode for a good four months prior to the test. There are two main reasons that cause the dog to fail the test. They are training by running the test and not having a workable training program. Here's two examples of what I mean:

- First – Training by running the test. At a SOLMS test while watching the duck drag we literally saw a dog drag the owner from the vehicles to the judges. The owner had no control of that dog at all. It crashed into the judges and caused quite a commotion. The sad thing was that dog had more raw talent in one paw than most dogs have in their entire body. The drag was better than perfect. He was fast and never deviated from the trail. However, when he got to the duck he scooped it up, spun around looked at the judges then ate the duck. Because of poor training one of the most talented dogs I've ever seen failed. You could tell that the dogs training consisted of running the test.
- Second - Example of not having a program and not expanding training areas. We were on the water and testing the dogs on the water blind retrieve. The dog had performed well until then. When the dog was sent for the dead duck she hesitated for a moment, spun around, ran back to the parked vehicles and jumped into the back of the owners pick up. A second or two later the dog came flying back did a perfect sit in front of the owner with a dead duck in her mouth. That dog didn't want to go into the water, but she was intelligent enough to try and figure out a solution.

If you are organized, have a program and set your own standards your dog will be successful. It's beneficial to have a log book, notebook or some type of chart so you can monitor your dogs progress, identify and solve problems and maintain a well-rounded program where everything is covered off. Vary the training sessions so that the dog never knows what to expect and train in as many areas as possible.

Training:

(review of what is required for the test)

The Down command:

- This part of the test often provides entertainment for the visitors, total frustration for the owner/handlers, lots of fun for the dogs and the judges just shake their heads.
- The reason the down command is such a challenge is because of timing, misunderstanding on how to teach the command and avoiding distractions.

- The best resource I've seen on the down command is the green book titled *The Training and Care of the Versatile Hunting Dog* by Sigbot Winterhelt and Edward D. Bailey. This is an excellent book and should be part of the library of all dog trainers.
- The down command should not be taught until the end of the formal training. The reason is because there is nothing positive about this command. It's not about being rough it's about making the dog go in the down position with his chin on the ground and the dog must stay in that position until released. It takes about six days to teach this and another three weeks to make it a permanent command. It's done in a series of steps.
- At the same time the dog goes down you must include the chin touching the ground. It takes a little time and effort but worth it.
- Once the down command is instilled then add distractions. While the dog is down have family members walk by and around the dog. Even better, work with a few training friends. Position all the dogs in a line five feet apart and place them in the down position for several minutes. Practice the down command twice per week.

Field work:

- Gun sensitivity – The best way to introduce the gun is by doing marks. That's where you or an assistant toss a bird and fire a gun. Once the bird is down you send the dog to retrieve it. It's important for the dog to associate the sound of the gun with the reward of getting a bird. This eliminates gun shyness and makes for a stylish dog. At test time when the gun goes off the dog will spin around looking for the bird and his activity will increase. There are all kinds of interesting training you can do with marks. For instance, you could work from a stationary position and have your assistant move to different areas in the field. Every time he stops he throws a bird and fires the gun. To increase desire and confidence you can have a long, difficult mark where your assistant tosses a clipped wing pigeon. When the bird lands it will run off. By the time the dog gets to the fall the bird is gone and the dog must use his nose and track the bird down. There is nothing better to increase desire and confidence than searching for clipped wing pigeons. Marks should be a major part of any training routine and done once or twice per week.
- Field work – There are several things you can do to make field work a fun learning experience for the dog. One session you could run is what I call the box. This is where you walk 200 – 300 yards. Don't say a word and ignore the dog. When the dog is the farthest away from you and not looking make a 90 degree turn and keep walking briskly. Make a series of three turns. Suddenly, the dog will be working in front of you. Do this occasionally and you will have no problems with check

ins. You could pepper a field with dead birds placed in a zig-zag pattern about 100 yards apart. Then there is the placement of birds to point. For real excitement work the dog in a field where there are wild birds. There are all kinds of things you can do to have a worthwhile training session. Field training should be done twice per week.

- Pointing – Most owners have an excellent handle on this part of the training and most dogs do well. The only I could add is to consider teaching the dog to be steady to wing and shot when you are working on pointing exercises.

Drags: (rabbits and ducks)

- Drags usually don't present too many problems as you are dealing with natural ability. What you should be concentrating on is compliance with commands and developing team work.
- Working drags is all positive reinforcement without any use of force. On the initial drags have the dog on a check cord and follow the dog on the drags. If the dog goes off the trail – Note, it's important that you know exactly where the trail is.- When the dog goes off the trail just give a minor scolding such as, "what are you doing?" lead him back to the trail at the spot a foot or two before he went off track then point to the trail and start using your first cue words. I use, "You find it, you find it." Then as the dog starts following the trail give some praise. Once the dog is following the trail then it's time to step up the training. Break the trail down into 3 equal parts. The initial line, middle and end drag. Try to put sometime challenging in one of those legs. The formula is two parts easy, one-part challenging. A challenge would be an obstacle like a log, or if you are following a path deviate by moving into the grass, up and down hills, different types of cover or best of all diagonals up hills. What you are looking for in the advanced drags is recovery time. If the dog goes off track observe at how well and how fast he recovers and follows the trail again. Don't interfere with that recovery.
- This is the perfect time to use cue words. When the dog is a few feet from the feathers or fur give your cue word. The dog should immediately put his nose to the ground and when he finds the fur or feathers he'll start the drag. Go with the dog for a few feet then release the check cord.
- This is a 50/50 deal. You are responsible for 50% of the drag. It's your job to make sure the dog is calm and confident, is on the right trail, holds the game correctly, does a perfect delivery to hand and does not become distracted. The responsibility of the dog is to follow the trail and come back with the game.
- There is one controversial concern when it comes to training drags and running the test. Some people suggest that you should put out two rabbits or ducks at the end of the drag. One is placed at the feet of the judge who is hiding nearby so he can observe the dog. This is a mistake and poor

training. It will lead to nothing but trouble as you are training the dog to go to the judge. You can train the dog not to be distracted by the judges at the end of a drag. At the end of the drag have your assistant sit on a white bucket, out in the open being as visible as possible about twenty-five yards away from the game. Your assistant should not move. If the dog is distracted by your helper, he will go up to check out the assistant. When this occurs, the assistant takes his hat and smacks the dog in the face. This doesn't hurt it only causes a shock. It must be done fast. The dog will immediately back away, pick up the game and run back to the handler. The dog will never be distracted by people again. Once the dog is running well drags should be done once per week.

Water work:

- Without doubt water training is challenging for owners/trainers and the most common mistake is to run the training sessions like they are tests. The idea of training is to solicit corrections. If you don't get corrections you are not training, you are exercising. This is a recipe for failure. For instance, your water work should not be done at the water's edge. Go back 30 or 40 yards from the water then run the dog. This will show any holes in your training program. An unprepared dog will not cross the water rather he will run the bank and after a period the dog may or may not enter the water. You could have the same problem on the far bank as well. You will also have problems with the dog eating the bird.
- You can prevent this by developing a love for the water. One way is to use a tennis ball in the water. This is a group session run with a few dogs. Use a tennis ball to prevent face biting. Dogs love competition. They will start flying into the water to get the ball. When a dog gets the ball three times he goes into the truck. We continue this process until all the dogs have three retrieves. This develops a real love for the water. Another confidence builder is to take out your canoe or kayak and paddle for a half an hour in the lake or river. The dogs will follow you and this eliminates any water problems. I do this once every two weeks.
- Doing water marks is a friendly formal method to develop a love for water and eliminate any fears. We have a marking drill where the first mark is thrown into the water and the dog retrieves it. The second mark is thrown across the water to the far shore. The dog has to enter the water, cross to the other side, hunt on land and retrieve the bird. Then you repeat the process in reverse. This eliminates hesitation to enter the water, prevents problems on the far shore and you develop perfect retrieves.
- Gun Sensitivity in the water – This shouldn't cause a problem as you have already done this process on land. About the only thing you could train is getting the dog to be steady and not go for the bird until sent. Just keep it positive.

- Water blind retrieves – To teach blinds correctly takes time and effort but worth it. You start off by teaching your dog to run blinds on the land. Use this time to give an understanding of running blinds and introducing cues. Cues are very important as they let the dog know that he is going to do a blind. You start off teaching cues by working yard drills. One drill is the 4-directional drill which teaches cues and the initial line. You must say the same cue on every blind. Example. “Sit. Dead bird. Way out” and when the dog looks out softly say, “that’s it.” Send the dog. Timing is also part of the cueing process. When you ask the dog to sit, wait 3 seconds and say dead bird, wait 3 seconds then when the dog looks out say that’s it. wait 3 seconds, drop your hand over the dog’s head, count to 3 then send the dog on the command, “back.” Eventually the dog, when he hears the cues, will look out to his front and when identifies where to go his neck will stretch slightly and his ears will come up. He’s ready to run.
- As stated dogs are place oriented and learn blinds by pictures. This is why you have to do so many pattern blinds in as many different areas as possible. They will review pictures in their mind and when they connect the picture with the blind there will be no problems.
- Repetition is the key to teaching blinds. You will need 45 pattern blinds that have to be run 3 times each. When you run the pattern blinds they should be run twice. The first time is to get the dog there and the second run is to build confidence. Once you have gone through the 45 pattern or rehearsed blinds you are ready to start cold or unrehearsed blinds. When you move to water the dog has confidence, understands the cue and is ready to run.
- Search for the live duck – This shouldn’t cause any problems at all. Dogs love this part of the training and catch on real fast. The problem you will encounter is if you do too much of this training. It will interfere with blinds as the dog wants to search as it’s fun and blinds are work. All a dog needs is to do the search 4 times before the test.

Well that just about covers all aspects of the SOLMS and I hope you have a good basic understanding of the training requirements. A well-prepared dog will solve all the problems.