

Training for the Solms (Start with a Plan)

by Randy Blanchard



One issue that is of great concern to me is the high failure rate of dogs running the SOLMS. It's an easy problem to solve and the solution rests with educating the owners in efficient training techniques. In our breeding program testing plays a significant role. Therefore, it's reasonable that owners should focus on training and the first step is to develop a plan.

The Old professional dog trainers had a saying for just about everything. The guy who trained me had a particular perspective on training which he drilled into me. He used to say – every time I made a mistake, “Training doesn't make perfect. Only perfect training makes perfect!” Perfect training starts with a plan. A plan promotes consistency, structure and goals. It also identifies weak areas and prevents bad habits from creeping into your dog's behavior. A plan is effective because it takes a systematic approach to training.

The first step to planning is to gather information. Spend time just watching your dog. Use a notebook to jot down notes of the dog's activity, record any weak areas and above all make notes of each training session. Your notes are the major ingredient in drawing up a plan. At the same time you should make use of your best asset, the judges. The judges are a wealth of information and freely provide their advice. For instance, a valuable piece of information to know is where most dogs fail in running the SOLMS. If you know where failures occur, you can then adapt your plan to cover this off. You will also want to have a working knowledge of the rules as you need to know the test requirements and plan accordingly.

Note keeping is the foundation of preparing a plan. Make detailed notes of all things related to the dog. Even small points as something insignificant can turn into a major problem. Cover off things that happened in the field and ask the difficult questions such as why the dog did this, how did it happen or was the behavior caused by me or the dog. Time invested in this will save many hours and eliminate nonproductive training.

Once you have the information you can draw up a plan and begin structured training sessions. The sessions should be short. No more than 15 minutes per session. You can have two or three sessions per day, but you must keep them short as this eliminates boredom. It's the owner's job to make sure each session has a specific topic and above all the sessions must be interesting and end on a positive

note. Two factors missed in formal training are play time and time off. Dog's are not robots. They are living beings and they need play and time off to maintain an enthusiastic attitude. Factor in play sessions after your formal training and Once every 4 or 5 weeks give the dog a few days off. This promotes a healthy attitude and helps to mold the owner and dog into a team.

There's one final ingredient to consider and that's a timeline. The end date is the SOLMS test. A plan allows for mile posts where you can assess how close you are to completing your goals.

Now you have your notes, information from the judges, a working knowledge of the rules and a timeline. To put it all together you need an overview of what's required in the test. This is where you set standards. Your training standards should be higher than the testing standards. This will ensure success.

SOLMS, an overview:

1. Obedience (This is important because as soon as your dog's paws hit the ground you both are under judgement. If you want to be successful, your dog has to be under control.)
 - a. Leash work
 - b. Call back drills
 - c. Pile work (where dog retrieves and delivers a number of objects)
 - d. Delivery drills
 - e. Down command
2. Field work
 - a. Retrieving and gun work
 - b. Field search and hunting pattern
 - c. Check ins
 - d. Call backs
 - e. Manner behind game
 - f. Pointing (nose)
 - g. Steadiness to wing and shot (Please note that steadiness to wing and shot is not a requirement of the test. It doesn't take much effort to teach your dog to be steady and should be included in your training. The benefit is that a dog taught to be steady to wing and shot is not likely to break point. This is why higher training standards are necessary.)
3. Drags (duck/rabbit)
 - a. Broken down into 3 legs
 - i. 1st – Moving the dog from the truck to where he's going to run. Has to be under control.

- ii. 2nd – Running the drag. (stays on the scent and is enthusiastic)
 - iii. 3rd – end of drag (manner in picking up the game and the return)
- 4. Water work
 - a. Blind water retrieves
 - i. Force drills
 - ii. Pattern blinds
 - iii. Teaching the end of the blind.
 - b. Gun sensitivity
 - i. Every time you shoot the dog should get a reward of a dead duck.
 - ii. Do this once every 3 or 4 days and give 3 retrieves in water. Excellent time to work on steadiness
 - c. Search for the live duck
 - i. Dogs love this part of the training, but you will have to be careful. If you do too much of this training the dog will stop doing blind retrieves and engage in large searches.
 - ii. This part of the training should only be done once per month
- 5. Play time:
 - a. Long walks after each training session
 - b. Tennis ball in the water (no more than 3 retrieves)
 - c. Put the dog in a field where there are wild birds and just watch the fun
 - d. Bicycle have your dog's run-in front you.
 - e. Canoe on a lake or river and let your dogs swim behind you. (builds confidence and a love of the water)

The final argument for developing a plan rests with the dynamics of the test. A test is not a controlled environment and you are not in a position to correct a mistake or behavior. This is why your training has to be perfect. Like everything else in life our tests are governed by Murphy's Law. When it comes to DK testing you have to remember that if anything is going to go wrong it will on test day. If nothing else this should convince you to spend time developing a plan and train for success.