

An Introduction to Tracking - By Lois Ballard

Tracking is a non-competitive outdoor sport where the dog and handler team follow the scent trail made by someone walking earlier in the day. The dog detects a unique combination of smells - the person's body scent, traces of soap or other toiletries, the scent of their clothes, and the smell of the vegetation crushed underfoot. Dogs have a natural ability to follow scent trails. Refining this instinct for Tracking takes time, training and patience, but is a very rewarding experience, where dog and handler work as a close team. A close bond develops between a dog and handler when Tracking. A good handler will have endless patience, since you cannot force your dog to track, the dog must want to do it. Motivation can be with food, a favorite toy, or sometimes simply the enjoyment of following the scent trail. Food and toy rewards are not allowed during a Tracking test, but are invaluable in training. Tracking is a wonderful activity for dogs of all ages, it helps build confidence in the dog, and is excellent preparation for field trials. If you enjoy spending time outdoors with your dog, I'm sure you will both love tracking

Tracking is an AKC-recognized sport, with three suffix tracking titles of increasing difficulty - Tracking Dog (TD), Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX), and Variable Surface Tracker (VST) - and one prefix title, Champion Tracker (CT). The start of a track is indicated by a flag, as is the direction of the track in a TD test with a second flag. The freshness and length will vary according to the level of difficulty of the test. A Tracking Dog (TD) test is 440-500 yards in length, has three to five turns, and is laid half an hour to two hours before the dog is introduced to it. The tracklayer drops one article (usually a sock) at the start of the track and one article (usually a glove or wallet) at the end of the track that must be found by the dog/handler team. The TDX and VST tests are considerably more difficult. They are longer in length (up to 1,000 yards for TDX, and up to 800 yards for VST), they use an older scent age (up to five hours old), have more turns (maximum of seven for TDX, and up to eight for VST). They have only one start flag so the dog must determine the direction of the track, and the dog is expected to find articles (which include plastic and metal on VST tracks) left along the track by the tracklayer. The tracks also include obstacles and will be crossed by people other than the main tracklayer. With VST tracks, the tracks include non-vegetated surfaces, such as concrete, gravel, sidewalks, and parking lots. The Champion Tracker (CT) prefix is given to dogs that have earned all three Tracking titles.

I have begun tracking with puppies as young as 7 weeks old, or adults at just about any age. To begin tracking, you will need a non-restrictive tracking harness, a 4-6' lead, food treats or a toy that your dog LOVES, a few articles (cloth or leather gloves, socks, etc.), some survey flags, and a place to track. A field of 6-12 inch high grass is ideal to start, but mowed lawn will work just fine. Be sure to ask permission from the land owner, don't trespass on their land. Try to track in different fields, dogs will get bored with the same place. If possible, check with trackers in your area for suitable fields to track in and be sure to avoid the fields during foxtail season if you live in the West. During the summer, you might consider tracking in the cool evening in lighted areas such as industrial parks or college campuses. Eventually, you will need a 40' lead, rain gear, and a fanny pack or something similar to carry water, food treats and articles so your hands will be free to work the line. Don't use a flexi-lead, any jerk will be considered a correction to the dog. Attending classes with a successful knowledgeable instructor is ideal but not always practical or possible. You and your dog can learn to track on your own, at your own pace and at your convenience.

The first time you lay a track for your dog, it should be a short successful track. Leaving your dog in the car or crate, walk out to the field bringing your survey flags and articles. Stop and place a flag in the ground at your feet. Taking small steps, place an article directly in front of you every step or two, and continue this for about 10-20 steps, always trying to walk in a straight line. Stop, place another flag in the ground to mark this as the end of the track and the final article in front of your feet. Continue to walk in the same straight line for another 20-30 normal steps,

and then circle back to get your dog taking care not to walk near where your track has been laid. Take your dog to the start flag, put the tracking harness on and attach the lead. Give the dog a command in an upbeat, happy voice, something like “find the glove!” At this early stage, you will be right behind, or beside your dog and may have to point to the track and give encouragement for him to go forward. When the dog reaches an article, say “what did you find?”, “good boy!”, or something similar and reward him with a food treat on the article. When the dog reaches the last article, have a party with lots of food, praise and maybe his favorite toy. Take the harness off at the end of the track.

In a tracking test, the track and the articles do not smell like food. If you use food on the track and on or in the articles, you are training your dog to track food, not human scent. It is perfectly fine to reward the dog with food for doing what you want, but do it in a way that the food comes from you and is not simply found by the dog on the track. There will come a time when you may want to teach your dog not to go to food that may be on or near the track. If your dog or puppy doesn’t want to go forward on it’s first track, you may need to use food on the articles for the very first tracking experiences. Once the dog is going forwards towards the next articles in anticipation of food being there, stop putting food on the articles. Let the dog reach the article and then walk up to the dog and reward him with a food treat at the article. Ideally, you want your dog to stop at the article and wait there for you to reward him and give a command to continue on.

If you are right handed, hold the lead in your right hand directly in front of you at about waist height. Using your left hand as a guide, the remainder of the line should drag on the ground behind you. Don’t wind the lead up in a ball when you gather it in, just let it fall to the ground beside you. The tracking lead is your main communication with the dog. Keep a slight tension on the line when moving forward behind your dog. You should be walking at a comfortable pace for you—do not let the dog move fast enough to make you run. When your dog circles at a turn, gather in the line as he works closer to you, letting the line fall to the ground. If your dog has not convinced you that he is going in the right direction, put a little tension on the line and at the same time ask the dog “are you sure, is this your track?” You won’t get a spoken answer, but you are hoping the dog will pull just a bit harder as if he were saying “yes, I’m sure this is right, let’s go!” When your dog changes his tracking style, body language, or you are sure he has wondered off the track, stop, let him have a little bit of line and verbally encourage him to get back to the track. Once he is going forward in his usual tracking style, then you can follow him and gradually gather in the line until you are again following at the distance you want to be. When talking to the dog, be consistent, using the same commands or questions. Talk to the dog only when necessary, if you constantly chatter, the dog will stop listening. Never scold the dog, always encourage him to do the right thing.

You may be doing the same exercise a few times before the dog is ready to move on to more difficult tracks. As your dog progresses, you will gradually lengthen your stride to normal, and increase the distance between articles. You will then begin to age the track a few minutes before running it, stay a little further behind your dog, apply a little tension to the line, and begin to add turns. Take small steps before and after the turn to concentrate the scent, don’t “double lay” tracks. Place a flag in the ground at the turn so you know exactly where it is, and leave an article a few steps after the turn. Each leg of the track should be at least 50 yards long. Once the track is longer than 50 yards or has turns in it, you should use a second flag 30 yards out from the start flag to help you with beginning direction. Gradually you will be increasing the age of the track, length, number of turns, and the distance between you and your dog. You will also want to develop a consistent article indication with your dog... you may want to teach your dog to sit or down at the articles. Don’t overdue it, tracking twice a week to start is great. Keep tracking random--age, distance, location, time of day... always keep the dog guessing and that will help keep him motivated. Always bring your tracking stuff with you.--you could be at another dog event and see a perfect tracking field, only to have no equipment with you. Improvise if you forget to bring an article when laying the track—take off a sock!