

General Preparations for Field Trials - by Carrie Hamilton

Socialize your dog. At field trials the dogs compete in braces. The dog should also be accustomed to having people follow it. At the very least two judges, yourself and another handler will be following the dogs as they work.

Condition your dog. While the dogs do not have to run to follow the rabbit, in the heat of competition they will probably do so, to keep up with their bracedmate. Also, while waiting in the gallery to compete you and your dachshund may end up walking several miles during the course of the day. The trial experience may be more enjoyable for both of you if you are in shape.

Expose your dog to the situations it will experience at a trial. Go for walks in the woods, fields, parks, etc. Allow the dog to sniff out new scents and listen to new "outdoor" sounds. I have seen dogs nearly leap out of their skins the first time a twig snaps under foot.

Functional obedience. This doesn't necessarily mean formal obedience, but it does mean that you can exercise some degree of control over your dog. Dogs should be able to wait calmly and quietly in the gallery. Quiet is especially important when "a brace has been laid on the line" (two dogs have been released where a rabbit was sighted). Dogs barking in the gallery can distract the dogs that are working. You may also find the experience more enjoyable or at least less strenuous if your dog will "come" on command or at the least will not continue running in the opposite direction. You are allowed to tackle your dog after the judges yell "pick them up" but you will probably decide to teach your dog to "come" after having to chase them down once too often.

When to Start - While there is no set rule, the sooner you start working with your dachshund the more likely that it will realize its full potential. This doesn't mean that a dog which starts its field career at a later date can't compete successfully. What it means is, imagine what this older dog might have accomplished if its training started as a puppy.

Many of us do not have the time or initiative to work all of our dogs in all of the areas in which our dachshunds can compete. While I try to expose the dogs at home to as many of these activities as possible, I generally concentrate on one area at a time. My usual progression is from conformation to den trialing, "real" hunting, field trialing, and potentially competitive obedience. Others work concurrently in all of the above areas as well as tracking. Whether concentrating on one event at a time or working on several at once, it is usually recommended that you use different gear for each activity (e.g. Resco lead for show training, choker or buckle collar for obedience, buckle collar for field work, harness for tracking). This will help the dog to differentiate between these activities. It will also make it easier for your dachshund to associate desired behaviors with each activity, such as walking with their head up and standing when you come to a halt at a show, sitting when you come to a halt in obedience, or keeping their head down and using their nose for tracking and field work. Our dogs even learn to recognize by our preparations and clothing (dresses/skirts for show or work pants and boots for field) what activities are on the day's agenda.

How to Start - This depends on both you and your dog's level of hunting/ trialing experience. It will also depend on the land you have access to for hunting/field training. For the novice trialer who has never trained a dog for field work, here are some suggestions on how to start.

Using Lures and Scent - The first thing you need to learn is to recognize your dog's body language. In order to evaluate your dog's reactions to the scent, you need to know where the rabbit has been. A lure which has had a few drops of rabbit scent (rabbit scent is sold at most hunting/sporting goods stores) applied to it can be used to lay a well-defined trail. Start out by first dragging the lure in a straight line or "L" shape. Later, more elaborate trails can be made, and the lure can be skipped to simulate the rabbit hopping. When evaluating your dog's reactions always keep the scenting conditions, especially wind direction, in mind. How does your dog respond to the rabbit's scent and what is your dog's style of working? If you can't recognize when your dog is working, it will be difficult for you to help with the training. Recognizing your dog's body language is also important for properly releasing your dog during competition. At trials, this is often the most noticeable difference between the novice and the experienced handler. Anyone can let go of a release rope, but some handlers are much better than others at getting their dog "started" on the line. Starting is more than just releasing the dog in the right direction. The dog should also be demonstrating that it recognizes that a rabbit has been there. Now that you know what your dog looks like when they're working, you need to find them live rabbits. Artificial rabbit scent is only useful for starting novice dogs and/or handlers. The nuances of tracking live rabbits cannot be duplicated with a scented lure or a "roadkill" rabbit.

Training in Snow - I envy those trialers who live in areas which receive frequent light snow falls. What can be better than seeing exactly where the rabbit has been. Just put your dog on a long lead or retractable lead and you're ready to go. I generally prefer using a long lead rather than a retractable lead. Either lead works well in an open area. However, a leather (or other sturdy snag-resistant material) long lead has an advantage in areas with heavier cover. If your dog enters a patch of dense brush where you cannot easily follow, the long lead can be released. You can then circle around the brush and retrieve the lead when the dog exits the cover. Since most retractable leads have plastic cases, they are more likely to get snagged or to break if used in this manner. By using a long lead your dog has some freedom but can't run wildly. So long as your dog is on the line you can quietly follow along. When your dog is having difficulty, you can verbally encourage them or use the lead to influence them in the right direction.

Training at Night - In the warmer months particularly, using a flashlight at night is one of the easiest ways to find rabbits. Any area where you have seen a rabbit during the day will probably have several rabbits out feeding at night. In addition, conditions at night are usually better for holding scent. For added security, when working your dog off lead at night, try using a reflective collar with a bell attached. This will make it much easier for you to keep track of your dog in the dark. For greater piece of mind, a long lead can again be used to maintain control of your dog. Lamping or spotlighting rabbits is rather simple. When you shine the light on the rabbit, its eyes will reflect the light. Often the rabbit will just hunker down in place. As you walk up on the rabbit, keep the rabbit's starting point fixed in your mind. If the rabbit moves before you get too close, you can keep your flashlight fixed on the rabbit's starting point and watch which way the rabbit runs in the periphery of the beam of light. If the rabbit remains in place as you get closer, you will have to move the beam of light off of the rabbit, so your dog doesn't see it. You want your dachshund to track the rabbit by scent not by sight. Training at night, if done correctly, can be used to help direct a visually inclined dog towards using its nose. Those dogs which are too busy chasing leaves, birds, butterflies, etc. to concentrate on following something by scent will have most of their distractions removed at night.