

TRACKING ... STARTING OUT

By Tom Hacholski



The process of how a dog can detect scent is somewhat complicated but mostly unknown. There are many books on tracking theories on what scent is, but simply put: scent is a substance that affects sense of smell. Some of these substances are thought to be rafts – microscopic bits of dead skin lost as we walk leaving a trail for

the dog to follow; crushed vegetation which leaves a residue which is relocated on our shoes to another area; the material from the soles of shoes along with the pressure of the footsteps leaving material – all creating a disturbance which the dog smells. The scenting ability of most dogs is so acute that they can distinguish the components of scent and determine which scent is newer or which scent is older. This aids in deciding direction. We don't teach a dog to track, merely to follow the scent we choose. We teach ourselves to recognize the subtleties of the dog's body language and learn to read his posture to work as a team to solve various tracking situations to successfully follow a track.

Tracking is the only performance event where the dog is in charge. It's the dog's innate ability to work through external conditions, some of which are temperature, terrain, wind velocity, ground moisture, humidity and barometric pressure, to follow the track. Per AKC's Tracking Regulations, "the purpose of a tracking test is to demonstrate the dog's ability to recognize and follow human scent, a skill useful in the service of mankind. ... Tracking tests demonstrate the willingness and enjoyment of the dog in its work ...". Starting out to train your dog to track requires a minimal amount of equipment, a fair amount of time and at least for the first two weeks, a partner is helpful. Training sessions should generally be conducted early mornings or early evenings when temperatures are cooler. These training sessions are a "six day a week over six week" commitment.

The first piece of equipment is a tracking book/manual with that particular author's method to follow. We "old timers" started out with the "Bible", Tracking Dog - Theory and Method by Glen Johnson. As in other performance events - particularly Obedience - the originals have been refined, creating newer and more defined techniques. I trained my present dog beginning at the age of 8 weeks by the Try Tracking!, A Puppy Tracking Primer by Carolyn A. Krause – a method I highly recommend. Others are Fascinating Scent by Susan & Orrin Eldred and Tracking from the Ground Up by Sandy Ganz and Susan Boyd. Other equipment needed after the first two weeks is a 40 foot lead (rope or lunge line), a non-restrictive harness (these items are more detailed in the training manual you choose), a food that your dog likes, such as hot dogs, chicken, or cheese, a special toy at the end of the track or anything that motivates your dog.

Page -1-

The first two weeks are most critical and a partner to lay the tracks is helpful, but not absolutely necessary. The basics of training all begin with short tracks – 5, 10, 20 yards long with food drops placed at intervals along the leg to reach an article/reward left at the end. Each day the lengths of the legs are increased, resulting in the aging of the track (time elapsed since the track was first laid) also increasing. The third week, turns are introduced and food drops are slowly eliminated. The next weeks' training include adding more turns which increase the length and age of the track. This is a simply stated process and some new methods follow a different routine which factors out age and introduces variations of turns - serpentine turns - very quickly.

The result of the training is hopefully to work toward an AKC Tracking Dog Title which permits the use of the letters "TD" after the name of each dog, with the dog certified by two judges to have passed a licensed or member club TD Test. Basic requirements for a TD track are that the track must be at least 440 yards and not more than 500 yards in length, that is aged for not less than thirty minutes nor more than two hours, with 3 to 5 turns.

Tracking requires dedication, but the rewards are great – both physically and emotionally.

