

A Tracking Story



Early in the morning, a mist begins to rise as a man and his dog enter a grassy field. The dog is wearing a harness. He is already pulling hard, straining to begin his task.

One hour earlier, just as the sun was beginning to rise, a stranger walked into this five-acre field. A cotton glove was dropped in this field and it is the task of the dog to find that glove. He will use his nose to trace the footsteps of the stranger until he finds the glove some 500 yards away. The only clue is a flag placed in the ground where the stranger entered the field. A second flag placed 30 yards away indicates the direction of the stranger's walk.

The handler walks up to the start flag and softly encourages his dog to “Find it”. The dog can’t wait. He already has his nose to the ground and you can hear his quick, staccato breaths as he searches for the scent of the stranger.

As the dog moves toward the second flag, the handler remains still at first, allowing the dog to pull 20 feet of line out of his hands. Finally, the handler steps forward behind his dog. The track has begun . . .

In honor of an old friend, I will hereafter refer to the dog as “Noah”.

In truth, we don't really teach our dogs to track. In fact, we can't teach them how to track because we don't know how to do it ourselves! Fortunately, we don't have to know how to track because our dog already knows how to track! He used this skill to find his mother's milk even before his eyes were open.

I know this may sound like some esoteric Zen saying, but it's literally true and it is very important that we remember this. Sooner or later in your tracking life, you will come to a point on a track when you will think your dog is wrongly indicating the direction of the track. You will pull your dog toward the direction you "know" the track must go only to discover that your dog was correct after all. The seasoned trackers with whom you are working will give you a knowing smile and remind you to always "Trust your dog!"

We do not teach our dog to track. Instead, we teach them the game of "find it". The game consists of following a specific scent and ignoring all others, until it takes him to an article accompanied by a treat and much praise. Let's see how Noah learned this game.

Step #1

The first time the handler tried tracking, Noah was just nine weeks of age. A friend helped out and Noah wore just a buckle collar attached to a six-foot lead. The handler placed a flag in the ground and then sat Noah down to the right of the flag. The friend then walked up to Noah and waived a cotton glove in front of him. He teased Noah with the glove as the handler held Noah back. The friend then walked 10 steps away from Noah, turned around to face Noah and again waived it for Noah to see. Noah was very excited and tried to run to the glove, but his handler held him back.

The friend then placed the glove on the ground and walked back to Noah and continued past him. As soon as he passed Noah, the handler brushed the grass in front of Noah and told him to "Find it".

Noah immediately ran to the glove and found not only the glove, but also the treat left behind by his friend.

This was followed by a great amount of ecstatic praise from the handler. In fact, the handler acted just as Lassie's owner did when he brought him to the well Timmy had fallen into!

If you think that Noah did not use his nose to find the article, you're right. He was simply introduced to a game of "find it", but that will quickly develop into "tracking" in the weeks ahead.



When we last left Noah, he had just completed his first track. It was just ten yards long and he didn't really use his nose, but it was an introduction to the game of "Find it".

The task then became reaching the goal of following a straight, single-layered track of one hundred yards that is thirty minutes old. In order to accomplish this goal, Noah was introduced to a series of progressively longer tracks that were laid in exactly the same manner as his first track. A glove was used to tease Noah as he was held sitting next to a start flag and the glove was dropped a short distance away with a small amount of food on top of the glove. Each time he was successful, the length of the track was increased by five or ten more yards. Each tracking day consisted of three or four individual tracks.

As the tracks became longer and the end more difficult to see, it wasn't long before Noah figured out that the best way to find the glove with the food drop was to use his nose. This is when "tracking" really began and progress came swiftly from that point on. It was also at this point that a harness was placed on Noah and his individual tracking style became a matter of observation. At this point, two 6 foot leads can be connected to make a 12 foot lead. Some trackers might bait the track with food every ten or twenty yards in order to enhance his work, although this is not always necessary.

After Noah was able to successfully follow a straight track for 100 yards, it was time to introduce him to a single-layered track. A single-layered track means that the track layer walked on this track just one time and going in just one direction. As you will recall, when the very first tracks were made for Noah, the track layer walked to a point where the glove was dropped and then walked back toward Noah along the same path. This made a "double-layered track".

Single layered tracks are best introduced gradually. An efficient way of doing this is to first lay a 50 yard, double-layered track. The next track of the day will then begin at the same start flag and will be layered over the first track, but it will be 25 yards longer than the original track. The additional 25 yards will be single layered. When coming to the point where the glove was dropped when laying the first track, the track layer will simply continue walking in the same direction for another 25 yards. At the end of this 25 yards, the glove and reward will be placed on the ground as before, but then the track layer will continue walking in the same direction for another ten yards, make a right angle turn, continue for 30 more yards before making a second 90 degree turn then walk back toward the start flag.

Some track layers will not use existing tracks as described above, but will simply teach single-layered tracks by starting them on very short tracks and increasing the length as the dog becomes more comfortable with them.

Before long, you will see that your dog can track the single-layered part of the track as well as he tracks the double-layered section. At this point, you can lay only single-layered tracks.

Before ending, I want to emphasize some very important points.

- Always show great enthusiasm and excitement when your dog finds the glove. This will help to make tracking fun for him. It will effectively communicate the goal of the game to him, and it will motivate your dog.
- Be patient. Be very patient! Let your dog progress at his own speed. To do otherwise is to create stress and possible motivation problems for your dog. This means to always let your dog do the tracking. When he seems to be off-course, simply stop and wait to move forward until he finds the correct path. You don't ever want him to learn to become dependant on you to find the track for him.
- Bring water for your dog to each tracking session. Offer it to him before you track as well as after you finish. A wet nose seems to find scent better, and tracking is very hard, tiring work for a dog.



While Noah is learning to track a straight, 100 yard single layed leg, this is a good time to discuss tracking equipment.

For your dog

- Water and bowl. Remember to offer water to your dog both before and after he/she runs the track.
- Harness. When Noah started tracking, we didn't use a harness. We just tracked him on a 6 foot lead and a buckle collar. Once he started to pull and obviously track with his head down, it was time to track him in a harness. There is a variety to choose from. We have found that a nylon, non-restrictive tracking harness works best. These can be found in a J& J catalogue, but most dog supply companies offer them. Just be sure that it is described as a "non-restrictive, tracking harness". It's best if you put the harness on your dog while he/she is in your vehicle just before you enter the field to run your track. It is best removed in the field immediately after the dog has completed his track. This tells him that the track is over and it will serve as a motivator. By placing the harness on him/her only while tracking, he/she will quickly associate it with this event.
- Leads. It is a good idea to have two 6-foot leads and a 40 foot lead. When we first begin tracking, we used a six foot lead attached to a buckle collar. As soon as we saw Noah with his nose down and actually tracking, we would attach the second 6-foot lead to make a 12 foot length and add the harness at this point as well. We won't need the 40 foot lead until ready to begin corners. Using a 40 foot lead can take some practice, especially with a fast moving dog. Most of the time, you will let out just 20 feet of the line. When coming to a corner, you can let out more line as needed. In most cases, it is best to track as close as possible to the track because this will make it much easier for you to read your dog when you won't know where the track lies. Many dogs will "quarter" or to track down wind from the actual track. This is not necessarily bad, but it could cause you to overshoot an article if you are not aware of it. You accomplish this by standing perfectly still whenever your dog is

tracking more than a few feet off the actual track. As soon as he returns to the track, move forward with him.

- **Treats.** Kibble, cheese, liver. Use what ever your dog craves. This will be placed on top off, under, or inside of the articles. This can also be placed on the track itself as a motivational tool if needed.
- **Articles.** This is what is at the end of each track and may I include such items as a cotton or leather glove, a belt, a wallet, pieces of cloth or leather. Once your dog has found the article, take time to play with tug or catch with him. You want to make him/her motivated to find this article and not just because it is associated with the food you placed on top of it.
- **Tracking flags.** You will need flags to mark the start of each track as well as the corners. Try to find flags at least three feet long so that they won't become lost in high grass, and select flags in bright colors that will be easy to see in a large, grassy field. Surveyors' flags can be used for this purpose and they can be found at Lowe's or the Home Depot.

Colored clothes pins can also be used to mark corners instead of flags. Some dogs learn to run to the flags, rather than use their nose to track.

For You

- **Wet weather gear and boots.** Your personal comfort is the key. The type of shoe does not appear to affect the dog's ability to follow your track. Be prepared for both wet and cold conditions.
- **Gloves.** - these should not be too bulky as you want to be able to feel the line as it passes through your hands. The gloves are generally for cold weather; however, if you have a dog that pulls very hard, you might want to wear a pair of thin golfing gloves to protect your hands.
- **Graph paper or notebook.** These are for making maps of each day's track. You will draw a map of each track noting such things as the temperature, wind velocity and direction, weather conditions, type of terrain and length of age. This will help you remember what you did each time so that your tracking can take a meaningful, progressive course. Try to draw your maps so that anyone could find the article by using your map. After you have run each track, use the map to make notations regarding all the things your dog did well or not so well. This will help you to define problems and strengths to guide your future tracks.
- **Watch.** A watch to time how long each track is aged.

Resources. Thus far, I have described the steps Noah took in learning to track. By no means, however, is this the only way to learn to track! It's simply the method we used. You are strongly urged to seek other ideas.

Here are a few suggestions:

- "Tracking From the Ground Up" by Sandy Ganz & Susan Boyd,
- "Tracking Dog" by Glen R. Johnson. These books can usually be found in most dog equipment catalogues. "Practical Tracking for Practically Anyone" by Julie Hogan and Donna Thompson . May

be ordered from the authors at 1144 Reynolds Rd., Cross Junction, Va 22625. Julie and Donna also conduct periodic weekend seminars in tracking.

- “The Audible Nose” by Judi Adler 12320 SW Malloy, Sherwood, Oregon 97140. This is an extremely detailed book with numerous ideas for teaching the same tasks. This is also an excellent book for problem solving.

When we last left Noah, he had started to learn his first turn. At first, we lay tracks that turned only to the right, because we found that he naturally circled to the right whenever he lost the scent. After he displayed the ability to make right hand turns, we then introduced him to the left, using the same technique as we used for right hand turns. This involved triple laying the turns and scuffing the ground both before and after the turn. We also included a reward (treat) about ten yards after each turn.

Before long, Noah was following turns both to his right and to his left. Soon it was time to lay tracks with turns going in both directions.

Now we were getting very close to certifying Noah for his first TD test. We continued to expand the length of the track up to 500 yards and aged his tracks up to one hour. We then made a list of several obstacles that we wanted to introduce to Noah in the event that he might encounter one or more in a test. This included tracking in all weather conditions (rain, snow, bright sun, strong wind, cold and warm weather), in tall grass and short grass, on hills and on level ground and using legs from 30 yards to 200 yards in length.

Finally, the BIG test came . . . tracking a blind track. This is a course which is layed by someone other than you. It is a track whereby you have no knowledge of the track and you must rely completely on your dog. This is a very unnerving and strange experience, but when successful the feeling is ecstatic and you will become in awe of your dog.

Should you not be successful the first time you try, don't despair. Simply view this as a revelation as to where you and/or your dog needs work. Does it reveal your lack of ability to read your dog, or does it reveal a gap in your dog's training? Either way, you'll want to correct the problem before you try to certify.

The AKC rules state that before you can legally enter a Tracking Test, your dog must be “certified” by a recognized tracking judge. This means that you must locate a judge and arrange for him/her to prepare a regulation course which you must then successfully track. Normally, there is not a fee for this; however, it is customary to provide the judge with a small gift.

If you are successful, the judge will issue to you four letters of certification. One must be enclosed with each entry you submit for a TD test.

Entries to tracking tests are chosen by a lottery system. Usually, there are several more entries than the number of available slots. All applications are held until a predetermined date and time. The entries are then drawn randomly until the total number of available slots has been filled.

Track Laying - No matter how thorough and patient you have been in your training there will always be those moments when your dog will completely lose the scent. At the end of this article, I will tell you how to get out of this situation and possibly save a friendship. If the person who layed the track can't tell you where the track goes, it could put a strain on a good friendship or relationship! The importance of a competent track layer can not be over-stated!

As a tracklayer, the very best way to avoid these potentially embarrassing moments is to carefully map every leg of a track. We will discuss mapping in our next article. Today we will discuss the physical act of laying a track.

Before laying a track, planning is extremely important. In addition to having a general plan for your track, you will also have to be sure that you have a plan for how you are going to walk out of the field when your track is completed. Failure to do so could easily leave you like the painter who paints himself into a corner.

The first skill a track layer must learn is how to walk in a straight line. It may surprise you to learn that this is not something that people do routinely! Place a flag in the ground to your left, and then choose a stationary object in the distance. Be certain it is a stationary object! Live animals and vehicles make poor choices. Trees, towers and fence posts tend to be more stationary.

Now you must select a second, stationary object that is either in front of, or behind the primary object. Walk so that these two objects will line up with each other. As long as you keep them in line with each other, you will be walking in a straight line.

Caution: If your track involves hills, your markers may disappear! Choose stationary objects that are at the highest points possible on your horizon.

Count your paces and try to walk at a normal pace.

As you approach a corner, look for other markers to help you identify the corner if needed. This could be a nearby rock, a tuft of grass or anything else that stands out from the rest of the terrain. Remember to record this on your map.

Should the unthinkable happen and you forget where your track goes, pray that your dog is good enough that he can find the track without your guidance. Just in case, however, the handler should always carry a spare article. If the track gets lost and the track layer has also lost his/her way, the spare article can be thrown on the ground where the dog can find it and have a "successful" conclusion to his track. This may also save a friendship or marriage!

Mapping - It is a good idea to draw a map of each of your tracks. This is an aid to the track layer who might otherwise forget exactly where the track was layed. It is also helpful in the long run because it will give you a

record of areas where your dog did well and where problems were encountered. In addition, it will guide you in planning a logical training regiment.

Graph paper makes mapping fairly easy. Noah's maps always included the following information:

- Date and location of track
- Weather conditions (temperature, sun, rain, wind direction and strength)
- Time track layer started
- Time track started by dog

Before entering a field to track your dog, it's important to have a plan. Each track should have a clear purpose, such as working on aging, on corners, on starts, etc. A rough plan of the track should be drawn before actually entering the field to lay the track. This can be created either by the handler or the track layer. Sometimes, this is the same person. This will tell the track layer what you want him/her to do. It will be only a "rough" plan, because the track layer will frequently encounter problems that will require him/her to alter the plan.

When the track layer begins, he/she will look for markers in the distance to give him/her a direction. Remember, it's much easier to walk a straight line if you have two objects that are in line with each other. These markers will be drawn on the map.

Each leg of the track is drawn as a solid line and the number of paces of each leg is written next to the track.

At each turn, a new set of markers is sought out and drawn on the map. Any additional aids at the corner, such as a noteworthy rock, or a fallen branch should also be drawn. The same procedure will be used to map each leg of your track.

If done carefully and accurately, a stranger should be able to use the map to find the article.

As the track layer is walking the track, other important features should also be noted and indicated on the map by the tracklayer. This might include a hill, a change of cover, a road or stream to cross.

When it is time to actually run the track, it will be helpful if the track layer will walk about 50 paces or so behind you carrying the map. He/she can then let you know when you are too far off track, or guide you if you lose the track. If the track layer also loses the track, it's time to fire him!

The track layer can also note on the map the path taken by your dog. The dog's path can be marked with dotted lines next to the solid line of the actual track on the map. Be sure to note any place where the dog gets far off course or starts to search for the track as though lost. At corners, especially, note and record the path of the dog. This information will later tell you how your dog behaves when the track is temporarily lost.

Does he circle to the left or to the right? Does he circle behind the handler? Paying attention to these details will help you to discover patterns that will aid you in reading your dog.

In addition to marking the dog's path with a dotted line, the track layer may also write comments on the map about a dog's behavior. These comments should reflect what the dog does well, as well as what he does poorly.

Many trackers keep the maps of all the tracks their dog has run in a binder or notebook. By reviewing these maps, a picture will emerge of your dog's strengths and weaknesses. You'll begin to see patterns of both and be able to design future tracks to correct the problem areas. It will also give you a record of how long the tracks have been aged and the distance of each track. Remember, you will have to work up to a track of approximately 500 yards with three to five corners that has been aged ½ to one hour. These are the conditions you will confront when you enter a TD test.

Entering an AKC Tracking Test - Finally you feel that you are ready. Your dog is successfully running 500 yard tracks that have been aged 30 minutes to 2 hours. He handles both left and right hand turns with ease and you feel that you are able to read him well enough to know when he is telling you that he has lost the track or that he is on it. You have tracked him in all weather extremes from cold, wet and windy weather to warm, dry and still weather. It's now time to enter into a Tracking Test and earn that coveted TD (Tracking Dog) title.

Your first step is to locate a registered tracking judge and have your dog certified. It takes a great deal of land and time to prepare a TD track. Most tests can accommodate just 4 -6 dogs. In order to ensure that only dog who are truly ready are given those available slots, each dog must be certified as being ready and capable of passing a TD test before he can be entered in a test. To do this, a tracking judge will lay a regulation TD track for you at a mutually agreed upon site. After allowing the track to age for the required amount of time, you will then be required to track your dog just as you would in a TD test. If you are successful, the judge will provide you with 4 letters of certification. You must enclose one of these letters with each entry you submit to a tracking test. The letters are good for one year and hopefully, you will be successful before that year expires.

A word here about Tracking judges. They are among the angels of the dog world. The requirements to become a tracking judge are difficult, time consuming and very thorough. Nevertheless, they rarely, if ever, receive monetary compensation for their work! Normally, their only compensation is money to cover their expenses and a modest gift. This is true whether they are certifying you for a test or actually planning the tracks and judging the dogs in a recognized test. This involves at least a full weekend of work and is almost always at some site far from their home. They do what they do only because they are passionate about the sport of tracking and I have found them to be the most helpful of all people involved in dog sports.

Certification is stressful, but it is always a good thing. Either you will pass and be certified, or you will fail, but an expert tracking judge will be there to guide you and advise you in what you need to do in order to be successful. You can only win.

Let's assume that you are successful and earn your certification. The next step is to find a test to enter. Most of the tracking tests take place between October and April. Acceptances into a test are done by the lottery method. There is always a cut off date to submit your entry which must include the entry fee. Normally, this is in the \$50 - \$75 range. The date and time of the drawing will be listed in the premium list and most clubs will ask that you be home or near your phone on that date between certain hours. They will then call the entrants in the order of the draw to confirm their availability. After enough entries have been selected to fill all of the available slots, alternates will be selected using the same method.

The selections for entries normally are made just 10 days or so before the test, so there is very little time to correct any tracking problems by then.

Tracking tests always start literally at the crack of dawn. For this reason, it is usually advisable to travel to the test site the day before. Don't let this be the first time that you will be tracking your dog away from home after spending the night at someplace other than your home. It will amaze you how this effects many dogs. It's also a very good idea to bring water from home with you for your dog to drink.

Be sure to bring proper clothing for all possible weather conditions as well. Tracking tests are never cancelled due to bad weather.

On the morning of the test, all participants and spectators will convene at a prearranged site. At this time, the order of going will be determined by another lottery and then it's down to business.

Try not to be nervous (HA!). Try to maintain the same procedures that you used in practice in the same order that you used in practice so that the test will be as close to normal as possible for both you and your dog.

Tracking tests are fun. Everyone there, whether they be other participants, judges, helpers or spectators, will want you to be successful and will be encouraging to you. After the last test has been run, there will be a short awards ceremony and a meal which I have never known to be other than delicious! Pass or fail, please try to stay for the ceremony to show your support for the other entries, the judges and the club which made the test available to you.

If you are successful (about 50% are at each test), not only will you receive an award such as a plaque, mug or tracking flag, but you will have conferred upon your dog the AKC title designated by the initials "TD" after your dog's name in the AKC registry. It will also qualify you for the next step up, TDX tracking which will be a whole new world for you and your dog to enjoy.