

3 keys to tracking success

Your dog might have the best nose in the business, but without training, it won't focus on tracking down that scent. **Margaret Keast** explains the three things you need to start training for tracking.

There are many methods to teach tracking and sometimes it is necessary to try more than one to get the dog started. But the three basic requirements are the same every time – the right equipment, rewards and techniques.

1 EQUIPMENT

A flat buckle collar is fine at first, but if you have a slip collar, attach the lead to the dead ring so that the collar doesn't tighten. When you get more advanced, you should invest in a tracking harness so that the dog can work comfortably. These are available in leather and other materials. Note that a dog car safety harness is not suitable.

A standard two-metre lead will be fine initially, although you will eventually need a proper 10-metre tracking lead.

For visibility from a distance, you will need to use a flag in the early stage of training. This can be made from wooden dowel, a heavy piece of wire or old fence posts. Whatever you use, it will need to be approximately one metre in height, with a bright piece of material or bunting attached to the top for visibility.

Training your dog to track will be easier with another person around, so find a friend and you can train together.

Finally get some socks – dirty ones, so that your scent is on them. Natural fibres hold scent best, but for now, any of your old dirty socks will do.

2 REWARDS

The next thing is to find a reward that really excites your dog. You know your dog best – is it more excited by food, a toy or attention from you? Your rewards should be something of high



value to the dog, which is not usually available, such as (if you are using food) barbecue chicken, cabanossi or slices of roast meat.

If you're using a toy, use one that the dog really likes, but is not normally available. I have a battery-powered, singing, dancing ball that drives my dog ballistic, but she can only find it at the end of tracks these days.

3 TECHNIQUE

On a clear day with only a slight breeze, start your training in a place with unmown grass and few distractions.

Plan a track of 10 to 15 metres into the wind, with a landmark such as a particular tree, post or building providing a sightline.

Place your dog so it can see you lay the track – it can be tied up or held by your friend.

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Take the reward along your sightline about three metres in front of the dog, plant your flag, drop a dirty sock beside the flag and start walking in a straight line for about 10 metres towards your sightline. Approximately each metre, wave the reward at your dog and call it.

Now the technique varies, depending upon whether you have food or a toy as a reward or yourself.

If you are using food or a toy, wave the reward at the dog, place it on the ground with another dirty sock, and walk back to the dog to take control of it. If the reward is you, drop into the grass and hide.

The handler (you or your friend) should then encourage the dog out towards the reward. Generally, the dog will pull strongly towards the reward. It should be praised by the handler and encouraged.

When the dog finds the reward it should be praised and encouraged effusively, as well as being able to play with or eat the reward.

Repeat this once or twice per session on unused ground, with up to three sessions per week, gradually decreasing the amount of calling to your dog.

Slowly increase the distance you walk up to 100 metres. Just as you would in any other training exercise, if your dog has problems, make the next track shorter and easier so that you can finish on a good note.

When teaching tracking it is very important never to reprimand the dog and to always be positive, as tracking cannot be forced out of a dog. The aim of training is to have a happy tracking dog that loves the sport. 🐾

May is the month for Tracking Trials, with no less than nine around the state! To find out where and when each trial is, download a copy of the DOGS NSW 2010 Show & Trials Guide or contact DOGS NSW. T: (02) 9834 3022
W: www.dogsnsw.org.au/shows-trials