



Take a different track

Making small changes to your tracks keeps training interesting and prepares your dog for the higher levels of Tracking competitions, writes Margaret Keast.

In training for Tracking, there are three variables that you can introduce to make your tracks more challenging – articles, corners and time – as well as a complicating factor, decoys.

Articles

Apart from track one, all other tracks require dogs to indicate the articles they find. This means that your dog must come to a halt at the article and make a positive indication of finding it by either sitting, standing or dropping, and then must not move until you've told it to.

Start this training early. Firstly, decide what position you would like your dog to assume when it finds an article. Sits and downs are the most stable positions, while a stand can allow a dog to wander onwards.

Practise calling out the command – 'sit', 'down' or 'stand' – while walking with your dog. Wait until you get the desired response, and praise and reward the dog before allowing it to move on. When your dog can do this, move on to a track.

When you're laying the track, drop a second dirty sock at least 10m from the start. If your dog works for food, put a small piece of that food on the article, or a small toy if your dog works for toys. Make sure that you know exactly where you have dropped the sock – perhaps place it five steps after a particular bush, or level with a telegraph pole.

When your dog pauses to eat the food or play with the toy, call out your command and move briskly up the tracking lead towards the dog, holding the lead to

prevent the dog moving on. Praise the dog, collect the article (and toy if used) and ask your dog to track again.

Discourage your dog from retrieving the article it finds. Firstly, retrieving the article would fill the dog's snout with scent and briefly make tracking more difficult. Secondly, the dog would have turned away from the track to return to you and would then have to find the track again.

Corners

You will have noticed that all competition tracks have corners. You must know where you are on the track before you can teach corners, and will need two sightlines and a marker (such as a bush, fencepost or gate at least 10m off the track) to lay your track.

To lay your track, head out towards your first sightline, going for at least 50m to allow room for the dog to settle on the track. At your marker make a small change of direction of no more than 15 degrees, to head towards your new sightline.



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Slow and steady

Vary one of these things at a time so that you can pinpoint any problems and, if you strike problems, return to the previous step in the training and make it easier for the dog to build those skills.

About 10m after the corner, place an article – this can often assist the dog around the corner. Walk another 30m or so and place your end marker and food or toy, then continue for another 10m before heading back to your dog, making sure to stay well clear of your track on the way back.

Start your dog tracking, and watch very carefully when it gets to the corner. Some dogs will continue tracking on the new line without noticing the change of direction. Others will continue on a straight line and lose the track, which they may indicate by raising their heads or searching more vigorously.

Don't allow a dog that has lost its track to continue forward; instead, encourage it to search for the track at the corner.

When your dog finds the track and continues on, praise it verbally.

When your dog is taking these turns confidently, you can increase the angle by 15 degrees, ensuring that your dog can still handle this. Increase the angle gradually to 90 degrees, but don't change each angle until the dog has successfully turned at least five times, and then increase it by only 10-15 degrees.

On the higher level tracks there are sharper corners. These are taught the same way, by gradually increasing the angle of the corner, but training shouldn't be started until a dog has its Tracking Dog (TD) title.

Time

The waiting time between laying a track and when the dog sets out on it can be increased gradually in training, five minutes at a time. Don't age your tracks more than the half hour needed for test three until you have a TD title.

Decoys

A decoy is created by someone else crossing your track and, in competition, it only occurs in track five onwards. Many dogs have no

problems with decoys and ignore them; others are drawn away. Once your dog has its TD title, introduce one decoy in training.

Cross the track at a right angle at least thirty minutes after it has been laid and, as with corners, place an article 10-15m after the decoy. You must know exactly where the decoy crossed.

When you and your dog reach the decoy track, allow the dog to investigate a few metres either way, but do not allow it to turn onto the decoy; encourage it to work the main track instead.

If your dog becomes confused with the scent, give it the scent of the start sock again and encourage it when it returns to the main track. 🐾

Training

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