

Advanced Tracking

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Although this article is titled "Advanced Tracking," the skills dogs learn in advanced tracking are only extensions of skills needed for "basic" tracking. In my opinion, the advanced tracking team is a team which has mastered the basics of tracking or trailing and can perform under many different circumstances to become an "advanced" tracking team.

I will describe each of these basic component skills and explain how I teach them. But first let me talk about tracking and teamwork in general.

The level a tracking or trailing dog team can achieve will depend on several things. The temperament and physical ability of the dog limits the ability of the dog to be motivated and focused. Physical endurance is another factor. Tracking is hard work for a dog, comparable to running, even if the dog is moving at a slow pace. This is why dogs tire quickly while tracking in hot weather. Dogs need to be physically fit to track well, and need to track frequently to be able to have endurance while tracking.

The amount of time and effort put into tracking or trailing training will determine how good the team can be. Like any other phase of dog training, greater effort means greater return. Effort means planning and thought as well as time spent. Trainers who produce good tracking dogs think hard about what they are doing, about laying tracks that will be run hours later and planning tracks so that the dog is successful in all types of conditions. They don't skip training because it is too hot, too cold or raining. They know they may be called to track in all conditions. Really good tracking teams spend many weeks, months and years training in that phase. Not all K-9 teams have the time to spend on this specialty; so many patrol dog teams don't achieve their top ability in tracking. One reason scent only or tracking only teams do better at tracking is that they do not have to devote time to apprehension work. But what a dog team trains for depends on the needs of each department.

Over the years I have become convinced that most dogs can track if they are properly motivated and trained to do so. Once the dog starts tracking, his ability to continue tracking depends on his ability to stay focused on the task. I know that dogs don't stop tracking because they are disobedient. Other things distract them. Dogs that are trained to ignore distractions learn to stay on the track. Their handlers and trainers have taught them that staying on the track leads to rewards that are greater than the rewards offered by distractions. The ability to focus also depends on the dog's

temperament. Some dogs are naturally calm and find it easier to shut out distractions and concentrate on ground-based scents. Others are excitable, easily stimulated and find any movements around them distracting. Training should adapt to the dog's temperament. The visually distractible dog should have very few bites or runaways on track. Most of his rewards should be ground based or he will be looking for a bite or reward from every person he sees in his range of vision. These are distractions the handler of such a dog will have to work on more than the handler of a calm and concentrated dog. Conversely, the handler of a calm dog will have to train more to get the dog to "light up" and become aggressive on command when needed if the dog is expected to do apprehension work along with his tracking. This type of dog needs to see training "scenarios" which introduce him to situations that the dog might encounter on track. The more I train dogs, the more I realize that there is no one "perfect" dog for every function. Every dog has strengths and weaknesses, and it is up to us as handlers and trainers to try to compensate for weaknesses with good training and handling.

Elements of Tracking Training

These are the elements of training I feel are necessary to produce a good tracking dog team:

1. **Ability to scent discriminate.** I am convinced that this is more or less inherent in good tracking dogs but greatly affected by training.

2. **Ability to start the track on the scent indicated by the handler.** This indication may be done with the presentation of a scent article or by having the dog search for a track. The dog should be able to "search" for the track and correct scent for some period of time. Experienced patrol dogs will often automatically select the track with "fear" scent or high emotional content, so that handlers of these types of dogs can rely on them to select the victim's or suspect's scent at a heavily contaminated scene. No one can say how the dog does it, but I feel it is similar to the wolf's ability to tell which animal in a herd is weakest.

3. **Ability to "identify" the tracklayer.** This would be a trained and unique behavior that the dog performs when he reaches or finds the person who matches the scent on the track.

4. **Ability to locate evidence on track or start a track from evidence located at a scene.** To some extent all scent at a scene is potential evidence, so just observing a well trained dog at a scene will reveal the path people (like contaminating officers) took in the area. Often the lack of scent in an area will assist in an investigation, pointing out where a suspect did not go and/or revealing that the complaint is unfounded or an attempt by the complainant to deceive officers. It is just as important that the handler be able to read and believe the dog when the dog says the track is not present as when the dog says the track is present.

5. **Ability to focus on the track** under various distractions and over various surfaces, easy and difficult, and under various weather and age conditions.

6. **Ability to continue on track and insist the handler follow even when the handler doesn't believe the dog is right.** This means teaching the dog to ignore the handler's body language. Strong willed dogs have fewer problems with this than more submissive or sensitive dogs. The handler also has to learn not to urge the dog to continue tracking when the dog is indicating there is no track present.

7. **Ability to know what direction the tracklayer is going** when the dog encounters the track. This would also include the ability to work out scent pools and complicated circling and backtracking by the tracklayer.

8. **Ability to stop on command on the track** in a fixed position, like a down, then resume on command.

9. **Ability of the handler to know when the dog is tiring** and take appropriate action to rest the dog or make provisions for another team to take over before the tracking dog loses the track due to fatigue.

10. **Ability of the handler to provide for the safety and maintenance of the team.** This means carrying water, equipment, radio and batteries, providing for proper back up and navigating and surviving in remote areas if that is where the track is taking place. Even in built up areas, the handler or back up officer with the team must have the ability to know exactly where they are and be able to communicate this to other officers.

1. Scent Discrimination

Dogs live in a sensory world where their reliance on scenting abilities is comparable to our reliance on our visual abilities. If you watch dogs closely, you will observe that they trust their noses over their eyes, almost always smelling someone before making a final decision on who they are. I think that all dogs scent discriminate but that we mess up their ability to follow one scent by our training methods.

To some extent, this confusion in training is caused by the facts that: 1) we can't detect and therefore understand scent ourselves and 2) we want dogs that can do everything: track, find evidence, detect drugs, etc. Given the confusion we cause by teaching the dog to find any object with fresh human scent on it, regardless of whose scent it is or who has walked around the area (evidence or article search) and then, on the same day try to teach the dog follow a track (ground) scent of a particular person, often when the track is not laid with particular care or the start checked or guarded against contaminating scents. Often we ask the dog to track multiple people on one training day. When you think about the potential scent mistakes we make in training, it seems a miracle that the dogs figure out what we are asking them to do. If we could see scent the way the dogs smell it, then we would see how much confusion we can cause if we are not very careful in how we lay tracks and what we ask the dog to do.

Setting Goals

To some extent, we, as tracking dog trainers, have to make some fundamental decisions on the type of tracking dog we want. I think that bloodhound trainers have a reputation for success because they tend to concentrate on one goal: find the tracklayer. To do this, the dog is encouraged to skip part of the track if they can smell a fresher portion ahead, to cut off loops, skip over evidence left and air scent to the person at the end if air scent is available. As patrol dog trainers, we tend to confuse and add to this goal a great deal, asking the dog in on one exercise to find the track layer, then on the next to stick to the ground scent to find most or all of the evidence along the track, or evidence that might have been thrown in the area if we are working evidence search instead of tracking. The fact that our dogs do these things on command shows that dogs are capable of being trained to do so, but I want to point out that the handler needs to be aware of what scents are there in training and be clear to the dog what the handler wants the dog to do.

Bloodhound trainers like to refer to their dogs as “trailing” dogs rather than tracking dogs, pointing out that “tracking” dogs usually stick close to the footprints or ground scent and “trailing” dogs go where the “body scent” lands. I think this is an important distinction for patrol dog handlers to be aware of. If the dog is trained to find evidence on track, we tend to emphasize the ground scent more and expect our dogs to stick closer to the footprints. Some training methods, like the use of food on the track, definitely tend to teach the dog to stay close to the footprints. I prefer this type of tracking dog because I usually don’t have the luxury of a response time that allows me to find the suspect at the end of the track. Sometimes I do, but most of the time I’m looking for evidence along the track and the path of the track layer. I also run older tracks and want the dog to work slowly and carefully along the track. A dog team who does many fresh tracks to apprehend suspects might be less interested in sticking right to the track.

This is not to say that my dog does not leave the footprints to follow body scent. Much of the time, particularly on hard surfaces, she does, and most of the time I leave it up to her to know what the most efficient way to follow the track is. Different training methods encourage ground or body scenting or both, and handlers should not be stuck on having their dog track in a particular style if that is not what is natural to the dog. Handlers need to be constantly thinking about where the track has been laid and where the scent may be.

Who Leads?

In tracking, the majority of the time the handler should follow the dog. In evidence search, the handler often directs the dog to search a particular area, although wise handlers will watch what the dog does first, because the dog will usually follow all the fresh tracks in the area as part of his evidence search. After all, in training, he’s learned that evidence is left on tracks, and, when practicing evidence search, he’s learned that the guy hiding the evidence leaves a track. For dogs who do tracking and evidence search, it can be confusing to the dog when he should take the lead and when he should follow the handler’s directions. Add to this a good amount of obedience training where the dog learns he must always follow the handler’s commands and you can see why some dogs become confused when tracking.

These are just some of the factors that affect scent discrimination tracking. I can’t describe all the things we do to mess up tracking training, but I will give a few examples and urge all handlers and trainers to think a great deal about how they lay tracks and present scents to their dogs.

Common Errors

What I feel are examples of common errors in laying tracks for beginner dogs that discourage scent discrimination:

A. Starting and ending a track in the same general area so that the dog may backtrack or be confused as to which direction to go. An essential skill to doing a track is the ability to find the track and follow it in a forward direction. Some of us don't let the dog do this, but start the dog pointing in the correct direction. The dog should be encouraged and set up so that he makes the decision on which way to go. If it is incorrect, the handler can stop the dog and ask him to try again. Be acutely aware of your "body language" and how it affects where and how the dog works. You can test this by starting the dog pointing one way while you turn your back on him.

If you start near the end of the track, or in an area where the track layer has been standing around, or where the track layer's air scent is blowing over the start, then you are just confusing the dog when you try to get him to track away from the concentration of scent. Start and end tracks well away from the confusion of where you park your vehicles and hang out while training. When the dog reaches an advanced stage, then you can start from the parking lot.

B. Ending a track in an area that may be too difficult for the dog to work out. This would mean areas of contamination or other distractions. The end of the track should be a reward. Be sure the dog is able to earn the reward by making the end easy. Put difficulties in the middle of the track.

C. Not paying attention to who has been where. If you are asking the dog to follow a single scent, don't run multiple tracks with the same track layer over the same area and expect the dog to go where you think he should go. Always ask the tracklayer where he has been before and after they lay the track. You may be trying to start the track in the same area the tracklayer walked or tracked his dog previously. If you are careful with this detail, you can run tracks in all sorts of contaminated areas without difficulty.

Dogs remember scents and people. Someone told me once that bloodhound handlers try to use only one tracklayer a day, even if they run multiple tracks. This is good advice, especially for the beginning dog. You can "weight" a track in your favor in a contaminated area by

using someone to lay the track that your dog knows and likes. Conversely, be aware that having your dog track a stranger over the area his "best buddy" tracklayer has run through or is standing up wind of might cause the dog to cross over to his best buddy if you are not careful. Using people the dog likes also comes into play when teaching the dog to identify the tracklayer.

2. Communicating to the Dog Which Scent to Follow.

I like to tell the handlers I train that the start is the hardest part of the track. This gets them thinking about how they are starting their dog and communicating to the dog which scent the dog should follow. Too many handlers just put a tracking harness on their dog and let the dog go. If you are looking for an "emotionally hot" person with an experienced dog, this works. But it may not work when looking for the lost Alzheimer's patient or young child who has been missing for three hours and the whole family has been out searching for the last two hours. There are ways to train to communicate to the dog which scent you want the dog to work. Even with dogs which key on fear scent, it is a good idea to have a starting ritual and some sort of idea when the dog is "taking" or choosing the scent the handler wants him to follow. For example, at a burglary, the handler can point out the broken door to the dog (assuming no other officers have touched it, or if they have, they are still there so the dog can figure it out), or point out to the dog other physical evidence left at the scene, like a footprint. Besides starting the dog correctly, prosecutors will want to know how the handler knows which person the dog is tracking if the dog's work leads to an apprehension.

I have been using scent articles in tracking training for many years now and I'm sold on their use. If the dog is already trained in article indication, their use come naturally to the dog and is a great aid in starting the dog in tracking. I use them at the start and along the track as intermediate rewards to help keep the dog motivated and to keep the dog focused on ground scent.

This is my recommended starting procedure:

A. When responding to a request for a track or evidence search, stop and let your dog take a break to eliminate before you get to the scene if this is needed. Walking the dog at the actual scene may not be safe and may contaminate the scene.

B. Leave the dog in your vehicle while you talk to the officers at the scene or examine the scene. You need to give your dog most of your attention when he is out, and you won't be able to do this while talking to others. If a scent article is available, or a starting point

(vehicle, door, evidence, footprint, etc.), locate them at this time. Ask officers to turn off any vehicles that are running. Vehicle exhaust will kill the dog's scenting ability.

C. Make sure you have all the equipment you need. For real life tracks, this might mean a radio, flashlights, spare batteries, GPS, compass, maps, water for the dog and yourself, flagging to mark routes or evidence, capable back up officers with equipment, etc. Time spent taking what you will need may prevent a disaster later on. For training tracks, this might mean food treats or toys for rewards, radio to communicate with the tracklayer if needed, water, etc.

D. Take the dog out of your vehicle on a lead that can be the tracking lead. Do not put the harness on the dog, but bring it with you. I carry mine by putting it over my head so it is readily available when I need it.

E. Take the dog on lead to the point where you expect to start the track. If this is a scent article, I usually place the dog's head over the article. If a footprint, I do the same, taking the dog close to but not right on top of the footprint. Now put the tracking harness on, standing on the dog's lead with your foot so you can control the dog and have both hands to put the harness on. Then unsnap the lead from the collar and place it on the tracking harness. The buckling on of the harness and the snapping of the lead will be the dog's signal that this is the place you will be starting and this is the scent you want. When you are done with the track, be sure to take the harness off as the signal that tracking is over. You don't want the dog to associate the trip back, when the dog might be allowed to run free, sniff whatever he wants, or even walk at heel, with tracking and the tracking harness. When the harness is on, the dog tracks and leads the team. When the harness is off, the dog is either under the handler's command or allowed to do what he wants.

In training, the dogs I train are trained to go down by the article during evidence search. To introduce the article in tracking training, I take the beginner dog up to an article, and, assuming he has been taught article indication, wait for the dog to indicate and reward him generously. Then I start the track by putting on the harness and switching the lead. If the dog wants to lie down again, I reward again, but remove the article so the dog won't indicate again. The dog has to automatically search for and pay attention to articles and their scents voluntarily, not be commanded or forced to down by an article to start. The dog has to want to seek out the article and smell it. The trained indication by the dog is his motivation to do so and his signal that he has done this. I always reward my dog in training for indicating on articles on track, whether at the start or along the track. For dogs

who pick up articles, the dog may touch or pick up the article to show he has found it and smelled it. This behavior should be rewarded.

War Stories

My latest dog has done some amazing things which cause me to wonder how much I missed when working my first two dogs, because now I am much more receptive to how the dog tries to communicate with me.

To illustrate how using scent articles can work at a criminal scene, I will relate a description of a track we did several years ago. A town about an hour from where I live requested my dog and me. An officer walked us across a large field at midnight to the place where the city fire department had put out two burning SUVs. Woods surrounded three sides of the large field. The officers assumed that the suspects were hiding in the woods because they did not see them leave. One look at the scene and the amount of light made available from distant street lights shining on the clouds convinced me the suspects were long gone, since it had been three hours since the burning vehicles were discovered. Most of the fire fighters had to walk in because it was four-wheel drive only. You can imagine the contamination in the area. There was fire-fighting foam all around. At one point my dog, walking on lead, showed interest towards a clump of bushes as we approached the vehicles.

I had my dog cast around the area off lead and she began to work the edges of the field and brush like an officer looking for evidence. I asked about this and the officer who took me in told me that an officer had walked that path, looking for evidence. I continued to work the dog in a general evidence mode in a circle around the vehicles.

Near the clump of bushes she had pulled towards on the way in, in the long grass, she indicated on a number of items that had been removed from or ripped off the vehicles before they were burned. I asked if any officers or firemen had touched them. The officer said no one had, they had not noticed them before.

I started my dog on a roof rack that had been ripped off. She tracked about 300 yards back across the field, taking a route which cut diagonally across the route we (and about 20 other people) had taken to walk to the vehicles. During several portions of the track after we got off the beaten contamination, I could see where two or three people had walked through the grass (it helps to be a game warden who visually tracks all the time). The track ended up near an apartment house, which unfortunately was where the fire trucks were

parked and a great deal of confusion still existed. In that area I became unsure of her route as she became distracted by the people, cats, and other influences. She also may have stopped tracking because the suspects entered a vehicle at that point, but I couldn't tell at the time.

Another story about a training track I did illustrates how you should be open to ways your dog may be trying to communicate with you. This was a search and rescue certification track, started in the parking area where about 10 other dog teams had been parked and milling around an hour before. The objective of the certification was to take a scent article and find and complete the track belonging to the tracklayer that had left from the contaminated area. We had laid two tracks for two teams and run the other team successfully before I tried the track. The tracklayer from the first track wanted to follow and watch as we tried my track. It was pouring rain and very windy. Scent was blowing everywhere and a great deal apparently ended up on the soaked dirt road that the two tracks ran parallel to.

We weren't ready for this exercise (I probably messed my dog up when she wanted to go or would not believe her when she didn't want to go) and ended up tracking the same route the first tracklayer went on. When it seemed to me my dog was incorrect and having trouble, I told her to track and began nagging her. Looking frustrated, she ran back and grabbed the scent article the first tracklayer was carrying in her hands at the time. She seemed to be telling me "this is what I'm looking for, stupid," but I wouldn't believe it at the time.

The evaluator asked me to try again, and we went back to the parking area to try to start again. She took the correct track this time, but because of the strong winds, tracked up the wet road when the track was actually running parallel to the road just upwind of the road in the field.

At this point I was carrying the scent article I started with. After about 100 yards of tracking, she lost the scent because bushes and trees separated the track from the road and the scent probably didn't blow that far. She needed to work back up wind, but was circling in the road to find the scent, acting as if she was stuck where the water was running in a stream down the road. I again nagged her to work, and in frustration, she ran back, whined at me and grabbed at the scent article I had, as if to say, "I'm trying as hard as I can, and this is the scent I am looking for." This sent chills up my spine, and I still found it hard to believe what she was trying to tell me until later.

We eventually found the tracklayer without help, but because she followed the blown body scent in the road instead of the track, we missed the articles left on the track. As we walked back along the foot tracks to find the articles, I watched her closely. Finding the first

article, she went down and looked back over her right shoulder. The tracklayer was walking to my left. The dog looked over her shoulder, right past me and looked at the tracklayer until I approached with the food treats for a reward. This amazed me because I had all the rewards, not the tracklayer. I watched on the next two articles she found and she did the same thing, ignoring me (with the treats!) and looking at the tracklayer, each time. Each time her gaze had to pass over me to reach the tracklayer, the one who had left the articles.

Hard to believe? Watch closely, you may find your dog doing similar things you never noticed before.

3. Identifying the Track Layer

Work on identifying the tracklayer starts with the way the tracklayer rewards the dog at the end of the track. The dog should always expect a reward from the tracklayer, and the handler should not be part of this process until the dog is advanced or if the tracklayer is unable to reward the dog for some reason.

If you want a dog which tracks slowly and carefully and stays close to the footprints, you can start the dog tracking for food or articles. This teaches a calm, careful and nose to the ground type style that I like because dogs trained this way tend to work more carefully. I've found that they tend to slow down and search carefully on the ground when they loose the scent rather than run around frantically and throw their head up when they loose the track. I like to start dogs without a track layer with ground based rewards to set their tracking "style" and then add the track layer later.

Other trainers start the dogs tracking with a tracklayer that teases the dog with a reward and then walks or runs off. This ensures the dog is well motivated but doesn't always keep the dog calm and focused on the ground scent unless the trainer and handler pay close attention to where the wind is blowing and what the dog's energy level is. Exercises need to provide motivation without having the dog loose focus on the ground scent. This method also means that it will be harder for the dog to indicate on evidence later on because his mind is on finding the track layer as quickly as possible and he will want to skip the evidence. One good point to this method is that it probably enhances scent discrimination more than a method using food and articles, so there are advantages and disadvantages to both.

No matter which starting methods are used, at some point the dog should know that the tracklayer has some sort of reward for him. This may be a toy, food, whatever turns the dog on that the tracklayer can have and present to the dog in a controlled manner. I've

successfully used a food reward to defuse dogs that only wanted to bite everyone they found, and this was not the response their department wanted at the time.

By the time they start tracking training, I assume that most police dogs have been with their handler and the handler has developed some toy or toys or food as a reward. I'm also assuming that the handler has taught the dog a "soliciting" behavior or the dog has developed one on his own. By soliciting behavior I mean some behavior that the dog does to tell the handler he wants the toy. Most patrol dog candidates are naturally pushy and readily bark, claw, push or stare at the handler to get a toy. These are soliciting behaviors. Less pushy dogs may not want to bark and may rely on eye contact, sitting or some other behavior. The handler needs to be aware of the behavior his individual dog favors. The handler can influence and encourage the behaviors he wants by withholding the reward until the dog does what he wants. It is usually not hard to teach patrol dogs to bark for a reward.

Barking is an excellent indication, but handlers still need to know what their dog's natural indication is because the dog may revert to it under stress or when confused. Whatever behavior the handler wants, it is extremely important that he do as little as possible so the dog learns to bark without help. Commands, showing the ball, using body language are all helps. Help may be needed at first, but the handler should remove it and expect the dog to bark or indicate when he is not helping, but standing still, not looking at the dog. Sometimes dogs will actually try harder when you ignore them. I teach SAR dog handlers to have their dogs get their attention by having the handlers do something unusual like moving up to a tree and stand perfectly still, facing the tree, not looking at the dog. The dog knows he is being ignored and tries hard to get the handler's attention. The instant the dog does something obvious, like bark, nudge the handler, jump on the handler, etc., the handler turns and gives his attention to the dog. A reward can then follow.

In the context of a track, the tracklayer may immediately reward the beginning dog, but eventually he should hide or withhold the reward and wait for the dog to indicate. When the dog indicates or even makes an attempt (like a whine), the tracklayer rewards. I feel it is very important at this point that the handler not help the dog at all. No commands should be given. With good training, the dog should indicate without help and make his own decisions. If the handler prompts the dog, the dog will come to rely on the handler's help. Besides the fact that this could be dangerous when the handler does not know where the suspect is at the end of the track, if you are expecting the dog to pick a track layer out of a group, it is the dog

who needs to make the decision, not the handler. The tracklayer is the one who trains the dog to indicate, not the handler. The handler should make sure the tracklayer knows what to do at the end of the track and what identification behavior is expected from the dog at that stage of training.

Indication training progresses until the dog indicates with the toy hidden, the track layer standing, sitting, laying down, in a tree, and even walking away from the team, a variation which needs to be taught gradually with the track layer walking in place first, then moving very slowly, then faster, as the added motion will confuse the dog.

Once the dog indicates reliably, "distracting," or non-target people can be added to the track. This can be started by simply having someone beyond the track layer, then having someone standing near or on the track about 50 feet before the track layer. This way the dog has more track to find beyond the distracting person even if he makes a wrong choice and indicates on the distracting person. If this happens, the distracting person ignores and turns his or her back to the dog. If the handler has to, he can urge the dog on. The dog should figure it out, start tracking and find the correct person.

When doing these exercises where the dog has to choose, tracklayers and distractors should be aware of their body language and hand positions. Some dogs will indicate on anyone who has hands in their pockets because they are used to getting a ball from the pocket. Try to work all the exercises the same and have the people assume the same hand positions at first. Tracklayers need to learn not to "give away" the presence of the reward before the dog indicates. Tracks also need to be laid where the handler carries the reward and gives it to the track layer when the dog indicates so the presence or smell of the reward does not become the reason the dog indicates. Handlers can even use the reward as drug dog handlers do, throwing the reward so it bounces off the tracklayer when the dog gives the correct indication.

Once the dog gets the idea of tracking past a distracting person, more people in more distracting circumstances can be used. As I mentioned earlier, don't be afraid to take advantage of the dog's preferences for one tracklayer over other in initial training to help the dog pick the right person. This approach works well if the training is being done in heavily contaminated areas or areas with a lot of other people.

4. Ability to Locate Evidence

Working in a rural area with long response times, I am a firm believer in teaching dogs to locate evidence because that is all that I usually get to find. At search and rescue scenes, finding a “clue” on the track can tell you if you are following the lost person or another searcher.

No matter what type of indication your dog is taught in evidence search, it usually requires a great deal of work to transfer that indication to tracking. Tracking is a different context than off lead evidence work, and for some reason continuing on the track is always a temptation for the dog. The big reward at the end pulls the dog forward so he wants to skip over the evidence, so the dog has to receive great rewards for finding evidence so he will feel it is worth stopping. I use food rewards for much of my work, placing hot dogs or other tempting treats on the articles at first so the dog will stop. Large articles can be used to help the dog. Ideally, the dog stops at the article on his own and is rewarded for that, then rewarded for a proper indication as the dog progresses. I reward my dogs on all articles they find in tracking training because it is a constant battle to balance finding articles over the bigger reward of finding the track layer. Sometimes it takes some time to balance these rewards out in the dog’s mind so it will stop for evidence, so be patient. It may also help to do many tracks without a tracklayer at the end, with articles and their rewards or a toy at the end for motivation. The handler can lay these types of tracks.

5. Focus on the Track

Teaching the dog to stay with and focus on the track is really about teaching the dog to ignore distractions and work the track out. I like to think of tracking difficulties as “resistance” which impedes the dog from being able to pull down the track. Tracking conditions, the dog’s conditioning, the dog’s energy reserves, a handler who interferes with the dog, distractions, heavy cover, weather, etc. cause resistance. When the resistance exceeds the dog’s ability to track, the dog has to stop. Training is all about building up the dog’s ability to oppose resistance.

Just like the simpler analogy of weight lifting, you don’t build up the dog’s tolerance of resistance all at once. It must be done in small increments, and the rewards for staying on the track must be consistent. It is motivation that will keep the dog working against resistance as well as training which conditions the dog to work.

Distractions must be small at first. Tracking conditions should be easy at first. Then, as training goes on, the tracks get older, harder, the dog has to work in poorer "tracking weather" (like hot and dry), the tracks are laid in thick cover, etc. These tracks should also begin to give the handler an idea of what the dog is capable of, and where the dog's limits are. The handler needs to provide rest and water on long tracks, and this needs to be done before the dog loses the track. The handler should also know when to call in additional teams to take over.

In this experience-building phase of tracking, take a good look at what your normal working conditions are. If most of your tracks are at night, be sure to train at night. Be sure to train with "back up" officers in training. We often take advantage of this arrangement by having the "back up" officer, actually another handler, tell the track layer where to go to lay the track. This way the handler does not know where the track is, but the other handler can help the team if they get in trouble.

Try to train on tracks that have average ages about the age of the tracks you expect to do while on patrol. Dogs can be sensitive to track age. If you always train on fresh tracks, as is the easiest to do, your dog will select for the freshest tracks. I know of one search and rescue handler who trained on only very old tracks and inadvertently taught his German Shepherd to follow the oldest track of a particular tracklayer. This doesn't work well when you are trying to start tracks from a person's house and tracks exist in the area for the last two weeks and you want to know where the person went the day he was reported missing.

If you work for a big city department with short response times, do older tracks, but keep the average around your response time. If you work in a rural area as I do, most of your tracks should probably be one to three or more hours old.

In training a dog to conquer tracking "resistance," what is the right amount of resistance to add? If the dog cannot successfully complete the track with a minimum of help from the handler, then too much resistance has been added. The dog needs to be successful on its own to learn. After all, the handler's ability to help the dog on a real track will be limited.

It also helps to work on one tracking "component" at a time. When teaching road crossings, make the track relatively easy except for the road crossing. When teaching aged tracks, start out with tracks that don't contain a great deal of hard surfaces or other difficulties. And keep in mind that weather, especially temperature and wind, sometimes adds a great deal of difficulty. On a dry, very windy day, you may have trouble completing a basic or intermediate

level track without additional difficulties. Adapt your tracking training to the conditions.

6. Handler Proofing

Since most handlers can't help but influence their dogs when they are on track, I like to do some "handler proofing" so that the dog understands he is supposed to lead even when the handler is not convinced. Some of this is done by enhancing the handler's reading of the dog and some of it is done by having the handler give the dog mixed signals and training the dog to continue tracking no matter what signals the handler gives.

Lead tension is the physical connection between the handler and dog. I know that some teams track successfully off lead. I have experimented with this but have been unable to use it successfully in all circumstances in the areas we work in. Most teams use a harness and lead to track.

I feel that the tracking lead should never be used to correct the dog. If the dog becomes sensitive to the jerks and pulls on the lead, the dog may stop tracking when the handler slips, hits a branch or has some other difficulty. The dog needs to know that jerks and pressure on the lead, while they mean something, doesn't mean the dog is wrong. Many dogs, once they think the handler is mad at them or has corrected them for tracking, will not start tracking again.

It also helps to start tracking with the dog before intensive obedience training using leash corrections. This way the dog does not associate tracking leash jerks with corrections. If obedience is taught motivationally with a minimum of leash corrections, this is not a problem.

Once a dog is tracking well, I make sure the handler can put some pressure on the lead to slow the dog up and make him pull against the lead. This helps the handler to read the dog and learn if the dog is really committed to the track or just searching for one. Most handlers I know hold the dog back a little once they think the dog has found the right track. The well-trained dog will continue to pull against resistance in the correct direction if the scent is there. If it is not, the dog will search in another direction.

Another way to help proof the dog is to start the dog on a track where the handler knows the direction the track leaves but deliberately turns his body in the opposite direction when he starts the dog. If the dog is paying attention to the handler, he will search the way the handler faces and have to work out the track. The next step in this sequence is to start the dog pointing in the wrong direction. A dog

that tracks well will quickly figure out that the direction he is pointing doesn't always mean the track goes that way.

I find it very hard for handlers to not help their dogs when they know where the track is. If handlers could act dumb and pretend they don't know where the track is, their dogs would progress much faster. Running tracks with a third person who knows where the track is helps a great deal, and benefits the third person because he can observe how the dog tries to communicate with the handler and the handler's errors in communicating with the dog. We are usually blind to our own mistakes.

7. Track Direction

I know that experienced tracking dogs can tell the direction of the track. They can do this usually within a 5 to 30 foot distance while following the track. I don't know how they do it, and I am still at a loss to design exercises that consistently teach this skill in novice dogs. Most of the dogs I have had experience with do initially make mistakes in track direction during training but eventually learn to go forward. My first dog was a dynamite tracker by the time he was six, and, to have him backtrack to find evidence at crime scenes, I had to block his forward path and insist he go backwards. With a few whines of protest, he usually did so.

Until the dog learns forwards from backwards, the dog's path can be very confusing to the handler when the team starts going around in circles and ends up where they started. The handler should let the dog circle and back track so the dog can work the problem out and hopefully learn direction.

One way to work track direction and track location is to lay a series of tracks in a straight line between known points and approach each track from a right angle. If the dog does not take the correct direction within 50 feet or so, the handler can stop the dog and have it try again. The tracks must be short so that the dog discovers the end reward (preferably a toy or food rather than a person which the dog can smell from a great distance) soon after he makes the correct choice in direction. This exercise is not as simple as it seems because wind direction and the previous choices of the dog (the dog will tend to choose the same compass direction which worked last time) influence his ability to choose the correct direction.

Learning track direction is essential to the dog's ability to work out circles, back tracks and scent pools. Real life tracks are rarely single line, unidirectional tracks. People stop, wander, back track and take side trips. Advanced training tracks need to reflect this. The experienced dog will circle the area of scent, trying to discover where the track leaves the scent pool he has just found. Many trailing dogs work tracks this way, following the edge of the band of scent, learning where the scent isn't rather than where it is. These dogs cut off circles and backtracks very quickly, following complicated tracks more efficiently than footstep tracking dogs. But they also miss more evidence, so there is good and bad to both.

One way to train scent pools and help to motivate your dog on older tracks is a method I learned from Bob Stutzman, now retired from the Bangor, Maine police. Bob would send a tracklayer out with a book to run a track. Bob would tell the tracklayer to stop halfway or two thirds of the way through the track, sit down and read his book for 15 minutes or more. This would create a scent pool at that location, but it also make the track less old when the tracklayer started again. The dog would track along on the older track and suddenly encounter fresher scent. This would perk the dog up and make him think that he was catching up with the tracklayer. Dedicated track layers can do this several times along the track and be present at the end to reward the dog even though the dog "started" on a track that was an hour old.

8. Ability to Stop on Track

Some dogs resent being stopped during a track. I worked with one bloodhound that refused to track over the area she was stopped in, leading the handler in a big circle around the stopping point back to the track 100 feet or more on the other side. With more stopping practice, the hound learned that stopping was not a comment on her tracking ability. Since some dogs think stopping is a correction, dogs should be trained to stop and learn to rest. I have seen bloodhound handlers stop and simply tie their dogs to a tree only to have the dogs continue pulling and trying to go, gaining no rest in the process. Besides rest breaks, being able to stop a dog with an obedience command like down, sit or stay gives the handler control over the team's progress without discouraging the dog. Stopping the dog gives you time to cross a fence or stream without damage, talk on your radio, recover your hat, or to let your backup officers catch up so they get shot at instead of you.

When working on such a command, give the dog the command and slowly brake the dog to a stop without any jerks that might be interpreted as corrections. Then wait until the dog complies, repeating the command in a normal tone of voice if needed. Praise the dog, and then move forward to reward the dog. Just as with evidence, you need to give the dog a reward so he doesn't resent the stop, and is willing, at least temporarily, to give up the reward of finding the tracklayer to obey your command.

9. Knowing When the Dog is Tired

Hopefully, in the many hours and days of training under all sorts of conditions, the handler has learned just how far he can push his dog. When doing long and difficult tracks, it is essential to stop the dog before he is exhausted and loses the track. A rest break and some water will recharge the dog for a while.

Water greatly enhances the physical endurance of dogs. Dogs allowed access to water would run 50% longer on a treadmill than dogs, which are not allowed water. The dog's nasal tissues must also be kept moist so the dog can smell.

The first sign of fatigue shows when the dog starts tracking with his mouth open. This does not signal an amount of fatigue that would stop a tracking dog, but as time goes on, the dog heats up and has to breathe more and more through his mouth, limiting his ability to scent through his nose. By the time the dog's tongue is hanging out and he is panting heavily, his ability to follow a track is severely compromised as well as his ability to reliably pick up the scent of a hiding suspect.

Most practical tracking dogs don't scent the track all the time, hitting every footstep. They sniff, move forward with their heads raised a little, sniff and check again, with the amount of checking depending on conditions, training and fatigue level. Learning the dog's tracking behaviors and patterns are all part of the handler's ability to read the dog.

10. Providing for the Safety and Maintenance of the Team

I'm sure every experienced K-9 handler can tell stories about tracking without the equipment they needed, no flashlight, no spare batteries, etc. Providing that equipment and the tactical decisions needed to keep the team safe are the handler's job. So you don't learn the hard way, take the time to prepare equipment and put it all

in one pack or place it can be picked up readily. Try to quell the burst of excitement you have when you first get a call and spend time anticipating what you will need for equipment, back up and strategies for the future.

A short list of essentials would be: water and bowl for the dog, water for the handler, flashlight and spare batteries (enough to last all night), radio and spare batteries, GPS, compass, map, clothes appropriate to the situation and anticipated weather (including body armor), rewards for the dog, flagging to mark evidence or points on the track, safety glasses for tracking in brush, etc.

Since many police K-9 handlers don't have the luxury of working with other officers who understand how the dog works, the handler shouldn't leave without going over instructions to the perimeter officers on what they should be doing, and the handler should make sure he and the back up officer or officers who are going on the track have an understanding of what will be happening. Search strategy will make or break the safe apprehension of a suspect, no matter how good the K-9 team is.

Summary

In my opinion, nothing determines how good a given K-9 team will be more than the amount of effort the handler puts into training and learning about training. Yes, the quality of the dog has an effect on the team's level, but a good handler, learning that the current dog he has is inadequate, will go out and find a better dog. Effort put into tracking training, planning for tracking and actual tracking translates into experience gained, and it is experience that determines how good a tracking team will be.