

Teaching Scent Discrimination

By Deborah Palman

Once a dog has the basics of following a track from a definite starting point, indicating on articles on the track and seeking out and giving a solid indication on the track layer, I like to teach the dog scent discrimination and to aggressively search for this scent, even if this means searching a large area. This means that the K-9 team should, not knowing where the track actually is, be able to search an area for the track, acquire it, and follow it to the end. Part of this training also includes having the dog puzzle out areas where the track layer has walked in circles, backtracked, or left scent pools by remaining in one place for a period of time.

Scent discrimination training requires that the dog be very motivated to track a particular person, and requires some common sense to set up. The handler should know where the track is so that he or she does not ever pull the dog off the track or the correct scent. Handlers have to give the dog more freedom to search and learn to trust the dog's abilities more. Scent often blows long distances, so the dog may pick it up some distance from the track. Hard surfaces do not hold scent well, and the dog may have to cast to the down wind edge of the hard surface and follow it there. Lastly, the air scent from the track layer may also travel some distance, and handlers need to recognize when their dog is air scenting the track layer (and not some other person) and be willing to follow where the dog leads, even if it is "off" the track. The handler must learn to trust the dog's abilities more as the tracking training progresses. The worst thing the handler can do is to pull the dog off track or tell the dog he is wrong when the dog is right. If this is done too many times, the dog will quit tracking, or begin to follow the handler instead of the scent.

The handler must not help the dog unless it is absolutely necessary. Even in when the handler has to help, the help should be very general, like directing the dog to search for the scent in the general area of the track rather than directly pointing the track out to the dog. Scent discrimination exercises should be trained with the dog at a high level of motivation so that the dog works on his own without the handler having to help beyond a general directing of where the dog will search for the track.

Trainers, track layers and handlers have to be aware of where the scent is. Don't lay one track with a particular track layer and run it, then lay another one on top of it with the same track layer. Go to a

new area. Running with the same track layer in the same area will encourage the dog to select the freshest track, and the dog may think that he has to pick the freshest scent, not the particular scent the team is looking for. Track layers and handlers have to be aware of where the track layers have been before, during and after the track is run. If the track is inadvertently contaminated by the same track layer, try to shorten it or have the track layer backtrack over the contaminated area to eliminate confusion.

Start scent discrimination with someone the dog knows and likes well. If this is not possible, have the track layer play with and/or feed the dog treats until the dog looks forward to seeing him. The first few tracks are done with the track layer leaving while the dog watches, and teasing the dog with food or a toy. This brings the dog to a high level of motivation so he will search aggressively. The dog may see the start, but not much more of the track. When starting, the handler should start the dog at a distance from the track and work into it. The track is run fairly fresh with a big reward for the dog at the end. Don't worry about any other contamination in the area besides where the track layer has been. We are relying on the dog's intelligence and motivation to solve the problem. If the dog is motivated well and has good basic tracking skills, he will succeed.

If the dog does well, progress to where the track layer leaves from an area where he has been around for some time, like the parking lot where the vehicles are parked. The handler has to know where the track layer has been during this time, and where the track leaves the area of "track layer" contamination. Often the dog will pick the fresher scent out immediately, but if the dog searches in the wrong direction, the handler can gradually direct him back to where the track is if the dog starts losing motivation because he has searched too long.

After the first few tracks where the dog sees the person leave, the handler can introduce a scent article to the dog when they start the search. If it is a person the dog likes, the dog should show a recognition of the scent. After a few of these tracks, the handler can switch to not having the dog see the person leave, and just start the dog with the scent article.

All the bloodhound training books stress that you should not switch track layers in the same day if you are working on scent discrimination, so this rule should be followed if at all possible.

These tracks can be run anywhere, in town or around other people, but beware of other difficulties that are encountered in town like hard surfaces, other dogs, cars, animals, people and other distractions that may cause the track to be too difficult for the dog to

follow. If the dog quits or needs help, make sure the next track is much simpler. Don't try to teach too much at once.

Once the handler feels the dog has the idea of scent discrimination, searching for the track and starting from a scent article, the tracks should be aged, and aged tracks run most of the time from then on. Constantly running fresh tracks will cause the dog to select fresh tracks, and very few of the tracks we run are fresh. Track layers should then be changed so that the dog is tracking a person he does not know well. If there is any doubt that the dog may not be motivated enough, have the person play with the dog and have the dog watch them leave.

Other Tracking Ideas

Work hard surfaces.

Have the track layer backtrack over a portion of the end of the track. This gives the dog a real boost at the end of an old track.

Start the track from the track layer's motor vehicle, putting the dog inside on the track layer's seat, or the floor where their feet have been, if possible .

Have the track end inside a building, shed, or other enclosure.

Have the track go through a barn, shed or outbuilding. Practice going through the building and also going around the outside to pick up the scent at the exit point.

Have the track layer hide high in a tree, lay on the ground, sit, stand with their back turned, be in a group of people, or walk away when the team approaches. Make sure the track layer and the other people don't cue the dog with hand positions or having the toy in sight. The dog must choose.

Practice fence and water crossings. Practice having the dog down stay on the track. This is good for fence and water crossings, when you have to get your radio out, etc. Practice having the dog down stay at the track layer (as if you had to attend to an injured person).

Practice with back up officers. For tactical tracking, practice with four back ups moving in the same line as the handler (like a deer drive).