

# **The Start is the Most Difficult Part**

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Once a police dog becomes proficient at tracking and can follow a tracklayer's scent aged to the average response time of the team, starting tracks and insuring that the dog is tracking the right person becomes the greatest challenge for the handler. Having strategies to insure the dog chooses the right scent is important not only to try to catch a suspect and recover evidence, but also to explain to a judge, jury or investigator which scent the dog was following when he took a particular route.

A team that successfully tracks older tracks in a contaminated environment has already taught the dog to follow a particular scent. Training should insure that the dog follows older tracks so that the dog is not just following the freshest track available. Training in town and city parks, college campuses, etc. will expose the team to plenty of contamination. Training also needs to expose the dog to tracking people the dog doesn't know. Most police K-9s don't have a problem tracking strangers, but sometimes small training groups cause the dog to continually track the same people again and again. If the dog also becomes friends with the person (like a patrol or shift partner that regularly interacts and plays with the dog), the handler needs to be sure the dog regularly tracks strangers who provide rewards in training so the dog doesn't get used to only finding friends.

## **Scent Environment**

Dogs live in a scent environment. They smell everything around them and can pick out individual scents in the area. They know the sex and emotional state of the people who are in or have been in the area. When a well-trained dog sees the handler preparing to start a track, the dog starts checking around the area to investigate possible tracks. One goal of training is to develop a track "starting ritual" that will tell the dog which scent the handler wants him to follow.

It has been my experience that most police patrol dog handlers don't teach their dogs to start with a scent article, where as most bloodhound handlers won't start a track without one. Patrol dog teams miss out on some great tracking opportunities if they don't teach their dog to pick the track scent off an article or object like a vehicle or door. Being scent-oriented animals that are constantly looking for tracks, it is only natural that a trained dog would welcome the input of information on whom to track.

When a scent article does not exist, there are other strategies that can be followed to try to pick up the correct scent. I will cover these later in the article.

I feel it is important to introduce scent articles early in the dog's tracking training, and the starting ritual should be used from the beginning of training and stay the same, whether the teams is doing training or a track on duty. Highly experienced teams may be able to cut corners, but it is important that new dogs have consistent cues.

When I am called to a scene, I always try to stop on the way in a safe place where I can let my dog take a bathroom break. At the scene, there may not be any safe places,

and, since you don't know exactly where the suspect or victim went, you may be parking and breaking your dog on the track itself. You will also be tense at the scene, ready to go to work, and many dogs will not relieve themselves when they sense they are going to work.

On training days, if the dog has been in the vehicle for any length of time, take it out, give a command or cue for the dog to relieve itself and take the dog for a walk. If you can, don't start a training task until the dog has relieved himself, and the dog will learn that the fun doesn't start until he relieves himself. This time to unwind can be important for young dogs that are full of unfocused energy that needs to be expended before they start training.

At an actual track, even if the dog has been let out to relieve itself earlier, give the dog a short time to acclimate before starting the track. This time introduces the dog to the scents, sights and sounds of the immediate area so they can orient themselves. Dogs have a need to know what other dogs, animals or people may be in the area and what their relationship to them is. Something seems to be satisfied in their minds so they work better when they are given a chance to check things out before starting a track.

### **Who Leads?**

I always use a tracking harness when tracking unless I am caught without it. The harness serves as a constant and powerful cue that the dog is tracking and provides the least restrictive way of attaching the lead to the dog. This is important because tracking is about leadership. Most of the time the handler is the leader of the police K-9 team. In tracking and off lead searches, such as building searches, the handler transfers the leadership of the hunt to the dog. This transfer is the most complete in tracking when the handler should follow the dog as long as the dog signals it has the scent.

I think that one reason bloodhounds are considered better trackers is because their handlers generally don't do obedience or control work with them. They are single purpose dogs. They don't experience the leadership conflict between the handler and the dog that patrol teams have. A patrol dog team has to work much harder to reduce leadership conflict during tracking.

In my system of training, when the tracking harness goes on a dog, the dog leads the team until the handler terminates the track. The harness going on also signifies to the dog that the location the harness is put on is where the scent will be presented that the dog will track. Sometimes the scent is on the ground where the harness is put on and sometimes the scent is presented in the form of a scent article.

### **The Starting Ritual**

I recommend the following starting ritual. When ready to walk to the start of the track, I hook the dog's collar to the tracking line. When I leave my vehicle, I put the harness over my own head, because that way the harness is handy, secure and I don't lose it. I lead the dog to the area where I am to search for the track. As bloodhound handlers are taught to do, I circle the dog in the general area to do a "scent inventory" and help the dog to become acclimated to the environment. Experienced dogs will often try to take a track at this point, but the handler should continue to do the ritual, in case the

track the dog wants to take is the wrong track. With young or inexperienced dogs, make a circle around the area where the track will be started, then stop and wait, holding the lead tight and watching the dog. The dog may walk around and pull on the lead a bit, but eventually the dog will become bored with the places it can reach and look at the handler. This is when I know the dog is ready to begin the track starting process.

After the inventory, I put the tracking harness on the dog, but keep the lead attached to the dog's collar. At this point I put the scent article on the ground in front of the dog, or present it to the dog in a bag. The scent article should have been handled properly and bagged to reduce contamination, but during training you can cut corners and just put the article down in front of the dog, making sure the handler and the tracklayer are the only ones who have touched it.

Ideally, the dog has been taught to passively indicate articles before tracking training started. The article trained dog will often sniff the article and then lie down or indicate on it as trained. I reward the dog with a food treat or other reward at this point for the indication. A dog that is trained to retrieve may pick up, sniff or bite the article. The dog's attention to the article should be rewarded and encouraged unless it gets to be too much of a game and too much contact with the article. The point is that you want the dog to seek out the article and pay attention to it because the dog expects a reward for doing so.

I once saw a handler try to get his dog to indicate on the starting article by leash correcting the dog harshly to the ground by the article. This actually created avoidance of the article. Make the presentation of the article a positive and rewarding event for the dog.

Pay attention to what the dog does with the article. Over time, dogs will develop a signal to tell their handlers they acknowledge the presentation of the article. One dog I had would touch the article with her nose and then make eye contact. Another dog may bite and flip the article and be ready to go. Dogs try to communicate with us all the time – pay attention to their behaviors.

Once the dog indicates on the scent article in some manner and is rewarded, I hook the tracking line to the harness and give my tracking command. Don't make the dog wait a long time after the indication, as waiting will make the dog frustrated. Acknowledge the dog's recognition of the scent article quickly and release the dog to track or search. They only need one sniff, and they don't need to have the bag containing the article put over their head or nose.

In the first part of training, I place the scent article out of the bag on the ground at the start of the track. Then I progress to keeping the article in a bag that is left on the ground, then to presenting an article that is in a bag in my hand. Then I start moving the article and bag away from the start of the track so the dog has to search before finding the track. Gradually increasing the distance from the presentation of the article to the track keeps the dog from being frustrated and taking the wrong track.

### **How Not to Start**

Having watched many variations of handlers approaching tracks, I learned much about how not to approach a start. Control the dog's approach to a start or place to search. Have the dog on lead and always watch what the dog is doing. Don't be caught

up in talking to other officers or watching other events – the dog is your priority when he is out of the vehicle. Often this is the time when the dog will point out the suspect hiding in the bushes across the street or an important piece of evidence other officers have overlooked. Leave your dog in your vehicle until you are ready to give him all of your attention when you take him out.

I watched one team approach a starting point with the dog off lead. We were doing a training exercise where had three tracklayers start from the same point. The object of the exercise was to have each dog team pick their tracklayer out of the split tracks by using a scent article. The handler let the dog run out ahead off him to the start off lead without presenting the article first. The dog, eager to track, immediately started tracking her favorite tracklayer from the three, one who was not the one they were supposed to track. The handler had to call the dog back and try to re-start. Of course, the dog still wanted the scent she had started on, and the handler had a hard time changing her mind to the scent on the scent article he had to start with. Dogs will choose their own scent if you don't give them input.

Put the harness on when you start the track and take it off when you are done. This is a cue that shows the dog when he is in charge of tracking and when he is free to do what he wants. Putting on the harness signals when you are going to present the scent the dog should follow. If you put the harness on at your vehicle when you start, the dog will be trying to track all the time you are moving him to the place you want to start, unless you have consistently trained a different starting ritual.

When the harness is on, be aware that you have transferred leadership of the hunt to your dog. If the dog seems to have lost the scent, you might give him suggestions of where to check, but these should really only be suggestions and not commands. If your dog is well trained in tracking, you have to trust the dog's judgment, or pretty soon he will be looking at you and telling you to find the track if you think you are so smart. You are better off to take the risk of following your dog on a few "wild goose chases" and fix the training problems later than you are to try to tell your dog he is wrong when he is right. Telling the dog he is wrong when he is right is devastating to your tracking training. We use GPS units extensively while tracking, and their use in training lets us to know exactly where the tracklayer has gone.

### **Scent Articles**

Scent articles don't always need to be an article worn by the tracklayer, suspect or victim. They may be a door handle or vehicle seat or vehicle accelerator touched by the person. Bloodhound handlers lay sterile gauze on objects they want to collect scent from. Once your dog understands the idea of scent presentation, try using different objects and ways to communicate the scent to the dog. Some careful thought into what has and has not been contaminated at a crime scene by other officers often gives the handler a place to start from. Don't take your dog out of the vehicle to track until you have talked to others at the scene and have a strategy to start the dog. Otherwise the dog may choose his own track before you present the scent.

Sometimes scenes are so contaminated that you can't find a clean place to start a search for a track and a scent article is not available. In these cases, I have had some luck deploying the dog on a long line on a collar in the immediate area. I don't give the dog

any commands at first, just let the dog hunt around and absorb all the scents in the area as well as meet any officers, victims or other people at the scene. The dog will take care of his doggy priorities (sniffing for other dogs, greeting people, etc.), and once those are done, if well trained, the dog will begin to check out the tracks and strange scents in the area. Sometimes I have been able to have the dog show me evidence or articles thrown by the suspect(s) at the scene that others have not touched, and they became a scent article to start a track. Often dogs starting tracks at burglaries will touch the door handle and then be off on a track. Be sure to duplicate this on training tracks because responding officers usually know not to touch doors at burglary scenes.

The “missing man” approach is another way to start tracks. If those who contaminated the scene are still present, like other officers and complainants, have those people present at the start and show them to the dog, letting the dog check them out and understand that they are not the person the dog should be tracking because they are not missing. This is an exercise that should be done in training before it is tried at an actual deployment, but most dogs understand this concept naturally.

### **“Enhanced” Scent**

If no recognizable evidence exists at a contaminated scene and no scent article is available, then the K-9 handler may have to trust the dog to take the strange scent or the scent of the most emotionally “hot” person there. Although I’ve not seen it proven scientifically, I know from personal experience and cumulative K-9 handler experience that dogs will prefer to track what was once called “fear” scent - the scent of an emotionally aroused person. This may come from the primal ability of canids to recognize the weak or fearful members of a herd of prey animals, or it may come from the dog’s association with people and officers. It may be the recognition of some sort of enemy to the police “pack” the patrol dog usually associates with. This instinct and ability is what many handlers rely on when starting contaminated criminal tracks.

Courts frown upon the use of the term “fear” scent because it implies the subject being tracked may feel guilty and that would prejudice the court. Terry Fleck suggests using the term “enhanced” scent which implies some sort of arousal without saying the word “fear” which may imply guilt. If a handler is just letting the dog choose his own track and having some success, he should be able to articulate and justify this tendency of the dog to choose enhanced scent in court.

I proved this tendency with my fourth patrol dog, who was an excellent tracker, strong willed and more than able to make his own decisions if needed. I was called to the scene of a home invasion and brutal assault. The scene had several witnesses, numerous police officers and the ambulance had already removed the injured victim. Witnesses reported several assailants who had come from a vehicle parked somewhere down the road from the apartment building. Officers at the scene wanted to recover any evidence and check to see if any of the assailants were hiding in the woods. No scent articles were available.

I let my dog check out the immediate area while on a long line but not in harness. He checked out the dog scents in the area, watered a few trees and checked out the officers and victims who were still there. After a few minutes, he began to pick out tracks and pull me around, signaling to me that he was ready to start. I took him to the

set of stairs of the apartment where the assault took place, put the tracking harness on and began a track. He immediately took off, ignoring everyone present. He tracked around the house, indicated in all the places witnesses said the suspects went (doorways, under windows, etc.) and then out and down the road to where the suspect vehicle had been parked. He did this on all sides of the house where the suspects had been. I finished the deployment by searching the area for evidence on lead (where appropriate near the highway) and off lead. Unfortunately, no evidence or suspects were found, but my dog did confirm the statements of the witnesses.

### **Search and Rescue**

At search and rescue scenes, often the lost person is not emotionally “hot” at the place last seen (PLS), or the PLS is the person’s house and the area has many of the person’s tracks in the area. In this case, the best strategy is to develop theories on what might have happened or where the person might have gone and utilize a scent article. Even if investigators are looking at the possibility of abduction or the person leaving in a vehicle, it is the job of the K-9 officer on scene to look where the person might have gone to be lost in the local area. I’ve been at several scenes where there were only a few routes the missing person could have gone and actually been lost so that they could not find their way home. You can eliminate directions of travel that lead to areas known to the person or neighborhoods where the person would have been seen over time or able to get help. Bodies of water may limit the person’s movement in certain directions, but be sure to comb shorelines for clues, track and to check to see if the person is in the water just offshore. At highly contaminated scenes, concentrate the deployment of the dog to look for tracks in areas where the person could have started into and gotten lost. Interviewing the lost person’s relatives or companions is essential to knowing where to look, because the person’s mental state and physical abilities will determine where to look. An able, normal and sane person will not be lost in an area they know, where as someone with Alzheimer’s, a substance abuse problem or other altered mental state could be in a thicket in their own back yard.

### **In Summary**

The successful use of a tracking dog requires as much work from the handler as from the dog. The handler has to train the dog properly and then utilize the dog to search for the track in the most advantageous manner possible. Every time a K-9 handler responds to a tracking call, the handler should be giving careful consideration to what might have happened and use the dog accordingly. Handlers should not rely totally on the dog to choose the right scent, but use scent articles and other strategies to maximize the chances that the dog will track the right person. Only with the handler providing the strategy and the dog providing the scenting ability will the team be most efficient.