

## **Tracking Handling**

**By Deborah Palman, Maine Warden Service, ret.**

Watching new handlers working at a tracking test for patrol dogs recently reminded me how much they don't know. I learn more by watching other handlers do things wrong and observing the results than I do by watching things go right. Since the Warden Service teams I train have a relatively high success rate at tracking, the methods we use produce a good result. Watching new handlers mess up their dogs' tracking helps me to see what is important when training and handling a tracking dog. Smart handlers always watch other teams work. You can always learn something, even if it is how not to do things.

The first rule of training a tracking team is that it takes at least a hundred tracks and detailed training objectives in tracking to produce a really competent team. Too many handlers work a dog successfully on a handful of easy tracks and think they have a tracking dog. Dogs have to learn to track in all sorts of weather, on all sorts of surfaces, on all sorts of track ages and in all sorts of terrain, like thick brush, open fields, contamination, etc. And they have to do this with some dumb human weighing 100 to 250 pounds holding them back.

Besides the physical hindrance of being tethered to a human by a short line, the dog often has to deal with a human who thinks they know more about scent than the dog does. Or a human who talks to other humans who think they know where the track or suspect is when they really don't, instead of letting the dog show what is really there. I've learned over the years that well trained dogs don't lie ... they just show us what is there.

## **Psychological Tethers**

Patrol or other obedience trained dogs have additional psychological "tethers" they have to deal with. Early in their training, they are taught to listen to their handlers, to follow commands and pay attention to what their handlers want. Being non-verbal communicators first, dogs watch their handlers' body language and interpret its meaning more than the handler's spoken word. Thus, if they are well trained in obedience, or just the type of dog that is sensitive to their handler, dogs are always conscious of what their handlers are doing, saying, looking at, moving towards, facing, etc. This has a tremendous influence on a dog. Go out with your dog and stop and stare at something. If your dog is in tune with you, it will only take seconds before the dog is looking where you are looking.

One advantage of bloodhounds and other single-purpose tracking dogs is that they are not taught to hang on every word or gesture of the handler. They learn to track and do that job alone, without the interference of having to know sit, down, and heel. Strong willed, dominant patrol dogs that enjoy tracking have the same advantage because they are not sensitive to their handlers and love to have an excuse to ignore their handler when they know they are right.

For normal patrol teams, however, the handler has a tremendous effect on the dog's ability to learn tracking. In tracking, the handler has to transfer the leadership of the team to the dog. In training, problems must be set up so that the dog follows the track and solves the puzzle successfully without help from the handler, so the dog learns not to depend on the handler. There may be times in training when the handler has to help the dog, but these must be minimal or the dog will not learn to track proficiently.

### **Beginning Tracking**

When beginning tracking, some sort of motivation system must be used. While some expert competition trainers can teach dogs to track using force, force-training tracking is not a good method for police and SAR dogs. Dogs working in the real world have to track because they want to solve the puzzle, hunt the criminal, find the lost child, etc. Only positive motivation will cause them to use all of their natural abilities and intelligence to follow the trail to its end.

While some tracking programs use only a person or tracklayer as a motivator, I prefer to use some sort of ground based reward to teach basic tracking, then mix training so some tracks have a person at the end and others do not. I find that ground based rewards produce a dog that concentrates more on ground scent, sticks closer to the actual path of the tracklayer and is more likely to detect evidence left on the track. It produces a dog that is much easier for a handler to read. Food or toys can be used as rewards on track. If the dog finds evidence or articles, these can be motivating also and "traded" for food or a toy when the dog finds them.

Whatever system is used, the dog must be brought along carefully so that it always is able to solve the tracking puzzle without the handler's help. The trainers and handler must be acutely aware of how weather, age and surfaces affect the availability of scent so that they don't overwhelm the dog and cause it to fail.

Build the dog's confidence with easy, short tracks that end with a reward. Be careful not to get into habits like always following trails, always doing a fresh track, always tracking in grass, etc. Introduce as many variables as possible within the dog's abilities.

### **Using a Harness**

Handling during training is crucial to future success. I think that the dog should always wear special equipment like a harness during tracking. This gives the dog a continuous cue that he is now the leader and is tracking, not heeling, not doing drug searches, etc. The harness should be put on only when the dog is being presented with the scent he is going to track (at the start or near the scent article) and immediately taken off when the person is found, the end reached or the handler terminates the track. Don't put the harness on and then have the dog take a five minute potty break – you are only teaching the dog that taking potty breaks and sniffing around are permissible when tracking. Putting on the harness also gives the dog the command to start looking for a track or scent to follow. If you do this back at the car, hundreds of yards from the start, how is the dog going to know what scent to follow? Remember that dogs are non-verbal

animals first. To a dog, putting on or taking off the harness is a much more powerful command than saying “Track.”

Some additional tips for using a harness: Since I am over 40, I tend to forget where I put things. If I take my harness out of my truck and carry it in my hand while trying to put a pack together, hold on to the dog and listen to what the people at the scene are trying to tell me, I invariably put my harness down and forget where I put it. I’ve learned to always take my harness out of the vehicle and put it over my own head. Then it is always ready and available to put on the dog when I get ready to start, and I don’t have to worry about holding it and a dog on a lead at the same time.

All but the most experienced dogs will jump around and be restless when you put the harness on. They like tracking and want to go. You don’t want to kill this enthusiasm by yelling at the dog or doing obedience, so often this ends up in a struggle to put the harness on. Since putting the harness on is a signal that this is the start of the track and the scent you want the dog to take, this event is very important and needs to go smoothly without breaking the dog’s concentration with a struggle, harsh commands or scolding. The best way I have found is to hook the tracking line to the dog’s collar at the vehicle and lead the dog to the start. Drop the line to the ground while holding on to the dog’s collar. Stand on the line up short near the dog to keep the dog from running off down the track. This should restrain the dog so you now have two hands to put the harness on. Put the harness on, present the scent article if you are using one and begin your track right after taking the tracking line off the collar and snapping it on the harness.

### **Handling During Training**

All tracking handling should be done smoothly with the idea that the dog is the leader in tracking, not the handler. On real tracks, handlers are only the support staff for the dog, carrying water, weapons and backup and making decisions about the deployment of the dog. They should make no decisions about how to follow the track because that is the dog’s job.

I oppose using any sort of leash correction on track. If you jerk the tracking line and accompany the jerk with a harsh word or command to stop what the dog is doing, then the dog may interpret any leash jerk as a command to stop tracking when it is on track. On real tracks, especially in thick cover, the handler can’t follow at the dog’s pace and often has to pull the dog down to a slower speed. Handlers run into brush, fences, have their hats knocked off and involuntarily jerk the lead in the process. If the dog interprets a lead jerk as a signal to stop tracking, then the team may lose its ability to follow the track. In training, the initial tracks have to be motivating enough that the dog gets used to the pull and jerks of the handler so that they do not pull the dog off track or discourage the dog. If corrections or commands have to be used, they should be verbal only. I’ve observed a number of handlers yelling at their dogs for sniffing what they thought were other dog or animal smells. When doing this, the handler had better be sure that the dog is NOT smelling anything connected with the tracklayer they are following. I always give dogs the benefit of the doubt and solve distraction problems with better motivation and easier problems rather than corrections.

If any corrections are given on track, they are verbal corrections only. If the handler still has to physically correct the dog, then the handler should walk up the line and grab the dog's collar, not jerk the tracking line.

### **Shut Up and Let the Dog Work**

Dogs need time and concentration to work out a track. They don't always just walk or run along steady and track. If they drift away from the scent or are pulled off it by changes in cover, or if the tracklayer takes a turn or backtrack or has left a scent pool, the dog needs time and space to work it out. I see too many handlers nagging their dogs by yelling or saying "Track, track, track..." or other commands, and walking close behind their dogs, almost physically pushing them along and certainly psychologically pushing their dogs to move forward. There will be times when the dog has to move behind the handler to find the scent. Although we tend to make our training tracks go from point A to point B in a more or less continuous line, lost people wander in circles, criminals backtrack and do all sorts of things besides walk in a straight line. Give the dog room to work and shut up. You should not say anything to the dog unless you are sure it has stopped working, or unless you need to stop the dog for a rest break or other reason. Talking to the dog and walking close behind it is the same as having someone walk behind you, stand close and talk to you while you are reading the newspaper. You can't read the newspaper and hear what someone is saying at the same time. You have to either listen or read, and your dog on track is the same way. Good tracking dogs learn to ignore their handlers if they talk too much.

Saying "track" or other tracking commands all the time also produces other problems. If the dog has lost the tracklayer's scent and is searching for a place to pick it up again, the dog may encounter contaminating scents. If the handler keeps commanding "Track, track, track," and gives a command as the dog finds a contaminating scent, the dog may think the handler is telling him to switch tracks. The best way to work a tracking dog is to stay silent and give minimal encouragement when the dog is on track.

### **Tracking is Hard Work**

Tracking is hard work for a dog. We tend to think that the dog isn't expending much energy while walking or trotting along on track. I remember a USPCA seminar with Glen Johnson where he mentioned that studies on energy expenditures while tracking showed that dogs are expending as much energy tracking at a walk as they would be running at a canter or gallop. If the track is very difficult, the dog has to sniff intently and exchanges air in its nose at a tremendous rate, expending energy to pull the air in and out of its nose. This is why dogs tire and overheat very quickly while tracking or scenting on a hot day. They are using a tremendous amount of energy to detect scent particles. Handlers need to be patient and understand that tracking is hard work.

Dogs also need to make decisions on track and shouldn't be pushed forward when they don't want to go. One older female I have is a very good tracking dog and very conserving of her energy, something I appreciate because I'd rather not run along and get all tired out cutting circles in thick woods, bouncing off trees, etc., like I do with my younger male. Particularly in urban environments, she would just stop at a turn or

change and stand there and sniff. At first I didn't know what she was doing and would nag her to go. But now I understand that she is still working and is just figuring out what direction to go. After she figures it out, she goes, always in the right direction.

### **Dog and Handler Body Language**

On a basic level, dogs have one very simple factor in their body language. They look at and orient to what they are interested in and turn away or look away from what they want to avoid. As humans, we do the same thing, and dogs are acutely aware of what their handlers are looking at and facing or orienting to. Unless a handler consciously avoids doing so, they will communicate much about the direction and location of a track to their dog by the way they orient and where they look. In training, handlers should know where the track is so they can know if the dog is right or wrong, to read the dog's body language when it is on and off track, and to help the dog re-acquire the track if needed.

Unfortunately, handlers become so emotionally caught up in successfully completing the track that they forget that it is the handler's job to support the dog, not to follow the track or show the dog, consciously or unconsciously, where the track is. When teaching tracking, patience is the key, giving the dog plenty of time to work the puzzle out on his own. This is one reason why I like using plenty of articles on the track and a toy at the end instead of a person. Then the handler doesn't have to worry about tying up someone's time waiting at the end. Often what seems to be an easy track ends up taking a great deal more time than anticipated.

Not helping the dog should start right at the beginning of the track. Don't get in the habit of approaching a start so that the dog is pointing in the direction of the track. I have seen some dogs that were always started in the right direction learn to launch out 100 feet before they put their noses down and try to figure out where the track is. After the first few successful tracks, almost never point the dog in the right direction. At a real scene, you won't always know which way the person went.

Understand that the dog needs time to make decisions at the start – don't expect them to strike right out in a straight line, especially if the start is complicated or contaminated. At complicated scenes, I often let my dog do an "overview" of the area without the harness on, so the dog can become accustomed to the area and gain information on the scents in the area before the start of the track. If there are dog scents in the area, dogs often have to check them out first to satisfy their biological needs before they will start tracking humans.

As the dog becomes advanced in tracking, when the team is doing longer tracks and has to take rest breaks, the handler should deliberately point the dog in the wrong direction when restarting. This can also serve as a confirmation that the dog is on track when done on an actual track.

Not helping also means that the handler must be acutely aware of what he is doing and where he is orienting his body. If we want to get the track over with, we will be always looking ahead towards the track and the next landmark, walking quickly behind the dog when he is right and slowly or stopping when he is wrong, pointing our bodies in the direction of the track when the dog is circling and working a turn out. These are all handler helps that need to be avoided.

The handler should try to stay back on the lead, keep the lead tight with light or moderate pressure all the time and follow the dog wherever it goes until the dog gets really lost or off track. The handler should always orient to and look at the dog in training. This keeps the handler from indicating where the track is with his body language. If the handler learns to really observe the dog, the dog's body language will tell him when the dog is on and off track. There is an excellent article on reading tracking dogs by Kevin and Robin Kocher at <http://www.cpwda.com/docs/Tracking%20Dog.PDF> , as well as other good articles on tracking training. New handlers should all read this article and re-read it every 20 tracks because they will learn something new every time they read it and relate it to their dog's actions.

If the dog really gets off track and quits and is unable to find it on his own, the handler will need to help to some extent. However, in training, the handler should never take the dog right to the track and point it out. The handler should always encourage the dog to hunt IN THE AREA of the track so that the dog discovers the track on his own, rather than the handler placing the dog directly on the track. Part of tracking basic training should be having the dog hunt out the track in a large uncontaminated area as part of learning how to start.

#### In Summary

Dogs are born with the noses and the drives they need to track, but they are not born with the knowledge of how to track. Tracking training needs to progress with measured and defined steps and learning goals along the way. The handler needs to understand that the dog does 99% of the work in tracking, so the handler can't help the dog while training, or the dog will become dependent on the help.

The handler's verbal and non-verbal body language has a significant impact on the dog during tracking. Handlers need to learn how their commands, praise and body language affect their dog and minimize their interference with the dog's learning. Handlers can help the dog to track during training, but this help must be such that the dog still discovers on his own how to find and follow the track.

Author's note: Some of the articles I have written in the past are posted on the Maine Search and Rescue Dog website at [www.mesard.org](http://www.mesard.org).