

AKC TRACKING - Getting Started

by April Rifenburg

DEFINITION FROM AKC REGULATIONS:

"The purpose of a tracking test is to demonstrate the dog's ability to recognize and follow human scent, a skill that is useful in the service of mankind. Tracking by nature is a vigorous, non competitive sport. Tracking tests demonstrate the willingness and enjoyment of the dog in its work, and should always represent the best in sportsmanship and camaraderie by the people involved."

REGULATION TRACKING DOG (TD) from AKC Regulations:

"A dog earns a TD by following a track 440 to 500 yards long with three to five changes of direction. The track is laid by a human tracklayer and is "aged" 30 minutes to two hours before the dog begins scenting. The goal is to use the scented track to locate an article left at the end of the trail by the tracklayer. The owner follows the dog on a long leash and can encourage the dog during the tracking test."

TIME COMMITMENT: Dedication is necessary to be successful in tracking. To give you an idea of the commitment needed to earn a TD, after about 30-40 lessons most dogs are ready to be certified. Certification means that in order to enter a Tracking Test you and your dog must successfully complete a regulation TD track under the observation of an AKC tracking judge. Further practice tracks ensure that skills and confidence continue building.

GETTING STARTED: In the first stages we make it easy for the dog to be successful by double laying, baiting the track, using an area with good vegetation, having the dog find his owner, using wind direction to our best advantage, and using flags to mark the track. Do not expect the dog's head to be down or the dog to be completely focused on the track in these early stages. For these starter tracks, find an area with heavy green vegetation and few obstacles. A flat area where the grass height is 3-6 inches would be ideal. I have started dogs in bare dirt due to drought conditions. As your tracking progresses, you will need to track in other areas such as pastures, stubble fields, parks, bare dirt, and well used tracking areas.

For the starter lessons, the dog can wear a buckle collar and be on a 6-foot leash. First, the article is introduced to the dog. Wave it, throw it, play with it, and entice the dog to touch, tug, or retrieve it. Reward with praise/treat for any interest he shows.

Next, make a track. The person laying the track (another person or yourself) places the start stake in the ground, rubs his/her feet on the ground next to it, shows the dog the glove by waving/teasing and steps out. If there is wind, proceed directly into it. This helps the dog to discover the scent. With these starter tracks, I rub the food treat on the heels of my boots at the start, and I take regular steps. I go 10 yards and place an end stake. The dog watches this procedure from near the start, but is restrained by a person or tied securely to a tree.

At the end stake, I turn back toward the dog, wave the glove making audible noises using the dog's name if necessary to get his attention. I then drop the glove on the ground, step on it, and place a food treat on top. I quickly walk back to the start on that same track (double lay), and drop a treat in the footfalls every few steps and at the start. (The bait can be dropped on the way out which gives you a visible trail to follow back to the start when double laying.)

The dog is immediately started when I return. I touch the start pad excitedly, encouraging the dog to sniff the ground/scent pad next to the stake. The handler also encourages the dog. (If I am working alone, I untie my dog and take him to the start stake.) As the dog starts to sniff past the start, the handler commands "Find It" and follows behind the dog along the track to the glove. Let him eat any treats he finds on the track. Repeat this procedure with a second track 15 yards long, and the third track 20 yards long.

If the dog does not move along the track, the handler should gather the leash up short and walk along next to the dog, keeping the dog on the track, pointing to or touching the track/ground. If the dog is overly exuberant, I brace myself and hold the leash short for control and to use as leverage to bring the dog onto the track where the food treats may help to slow him down. If the dog leaves the track (and he probably will), you STOP. Do not move. Increase tension on the leash to prevent him from straying further in the wrong direction. Guide him back to the track with the increased leash tension and as he discovers the track or the bait and moves forward you can then move with him. Praise like crazy when he reaches the article and feed him the treat he finds there.

For the next tracking outing, the same procedure is repeated, making the tracks a few yards longer each time (15, 20, 30 yds.). If the dog is acting interested and is making an effort to follow the track, I stop double laying the tracks. To make a single track, bait as you go, drop the glove/bait at the end,

and then continue another 15 or so paces out past the end flag, turn and exit 15 - 20 paces away from your track.

From here on out, a Tracking Harness is required. Your steps will need to become longer strides to measure the track length in yards. A structured tracking program will help you and your dog progress quickly. A tracking schedule will show you how to gradually increase the length and age of the tracks as well as how to add turns, solve problems, and work your way up to fully regulation tracks.

Build a Foundation for quicker learning, more reliable tracking. Help, guide, build skills in the dog with planned lessons and weekly tracking charts which are available in tracking books and on the internet. Tracking lessons are offered through some dog training clubs or private instructors.

Encourage - Teach the dog to stay on the track. Use a 6-foot leash until the dog is moving out ahead of the handler, nose down close to the ground. If the dog leaves the track, stop, apply extra tension to the line until the dog's nose swings back onto the track. When the dog is back on the track and moving forward, you can move with him. After several lessons, when the dog is moving along the track with some idea that he is following a trail, I change to a 12-foot line. I don't use a regulation length line until after turns have been introduced and the dog has some understanding of changing track direction.

Motivate - By using praise, food treats, glove/article play, by dragging a bone or meat along the track, by rubbing bait on the heels of your boots, by hiding an extra yummy treat in the article. Food on the track is gradually faded out as the dog progresses and eventually the treat comes from you after the dog finds the article.

Line Control - The line is the link, the communication between dog and handler. In beginning stages, tension on the line is used to guide the dog back onto the track. The line should be kept taut when the dog is tracking and held up off the dog's back. Do not allow it to tangle. Line handling becomes easier with experience.

Read Dog -You will learn when your dog is right on the track, when he loses scent or focus, when track direction changes, when he might be fringe tracking, when he locates the article - through his tail carriage, body posture, head carriage, and gestures.

Starts:

- Have your line ready, untangled before heading to starting stake.
 - Harness dog on way to start about 15 feet before the flag..
 - Give the dog full scent at start flag, scent pad. A down position is preferred to aid the dog in taking the scent in.
 - There will be an article (cloth) at the start flag. This is a new AKC rule.
- Give the dog a command to track, such as "Go Find," "Find It," or "Track!"
- For a Regulation track there is a start flag where the track begins and 30 yards straight out beyond this flag is a second flag indicating track direction.

Article Indication: The dog must indicate the article in a way that the judge can observe. This can be by retrieving it, downing next to it, sitting next to it, pawing it, glancing at it. Placing food in an article helps the dog to understand that he is looking for something. Clickers come in handy for teaching article indication and downing or sitting at the article.

End of Track:

- For training purposes, use a stake at the article indicating the end of the track.
- End article is a glove or wallet.
- After glove is found and treats are fed, the harness comes off.
- Lots of Praise for this amazing find!
- Water after the track is completed or during track if weather is hot or humid

Turns- when dog is confident on straight tracks, turns are introduced. Triple lay turns in the beginning. -Glen Johnson week 3 & 4 is a must.

Stake Corners when turns are first introduced. As the dog progresses he will not see the tracks laid. Soon the stakes will be discontinued for marking the corners and **Mapping** will begin.

EQUIPMENT FOR DOG:

Harness - leather or nylon

Line - 6 ft., 12 ft., 40 ft.

Food Treats - small, soft pieces for track, larger treats for hiding under or in article- hot dogs, cheese, chicken, meat, hard boiled egg, baby food, etc.

Water

Tick/Mosquito repellent, optional

EQUIPMENT FOR HANDLER:

Tracking Book and Schedule

Articles--Gloves, wallets, glass cases, bandanas. The thrift store is a good source.

Fanny Pack, Vest or Jacket with lots of pockets to hold articles, treats, water, etc.

Boots

Stakes: Wire surveyor stakes with plastic flags. Or make out of wooden dowels, tie on surveyor flagging.

Notepad, pencil or pen, and/or **Clipboard** - For notes and **Map making**

Sun screen

Rain Gear

TRACK SCENT - There is the actual track scent, where the footfalls and crushed vegetation or soil is. There is also a body scent and an air scent. Weather conditions, heat, and wind greatly influence scent as do buildings, fences, trees, shrubs, changes of cover. Scenting is a hypothesis to us. Only the dog knows exactly what scent is and does. A dog can easily scent 10-20 feet (or more) from the track. This is called fringe tracking and it can cause a dog to miss a turn, lose the track, miss an article. Do not allow fringe tracking for AKC tracking.

A dog cannot be made to track. What you must do is set up a tracking lesson in which the dog will be successful and build each lesson on the success of the previous one. Dogs that like food have good concentration and confidence are the easiest to work with, but they are all trainable. Some trackers do not use any food on the track, only in the article. No food is allowed on a test track.

There are no "No's!" Could you get down on your hands and knees, sniff the ground and find the track? The dog must be successful even if you have to help him every step on these first tracks. When he gets to the end stake and the

glove and extra treat there, he MUST be praised as the most amazing dog in the world.

Tracking Resources and Books

The following resources will get you started in AKC tracking. Check Amazon.com or dogwise.com as well as various dog catalogs or book stores for availability.

Tracking Regulations are available from the American Kennel Club. www.akc.org/rules/tracking.cfm

These are a must for definitions and knowledge.

Tracking From the Ground Up, by Sandy Ganz and Susan Boyd (Show-Me Publications). An easy-to-use resource. Perfect for the beginning tracker. My favorite.

Tracking Fundamentals (video) with Sandy Ganz,

Tracking Dog: Theory and Methods, by Glen R. Johnson (Arner Publications). This is a classic and the "bible" of restrictive tracking. This book is more technical than Ganz & Boyd, but I highly recommend it. Together, the two books provide all the information you need for success.

Practical Tracking for Practically Everyone, by Julie Hogan and Donna Thompson. Another good how-to manual from authors with a combined total of 70 tracking titles.

Enthusiastic Tracking, The Step-by-step Training Manual, William R. Sanders. Presents a structured and motivational training method that prepares the dog and handler for the TD & TDX tests. Bill helped train the first TDX Berner (1985), Viva's Graemlicker Bischof, owned by Carolyn Gramlich.

Component Training for Variable Surface Tracking, Ed Presnall and Christy Bergeon.

Keeping Track: A Record of Your Dog's Progress in the Tracking Field, (Mueller Publications). This nifty package includes blank maps, mobile map-maker and Pocket Tracker.

Scent and the Scenting Dog, by William G. Syrotuck (Arner Publications). A very technical manual about the dynamics of scent and how dogs perform this amazing feat. Read this after you're completely hooked on the sport.

Puppy Tracking Primer by Carolyn Krause. Puppies can start tracking before they're old enough to do much else; the relaxed atmosphere and no-stress exercise is perfect for developing minds and bodies.