



Only the NOSE really KNOWS Part 2 by Armin Winkler

Part 1 of this article was a discussion of the fundamental concepts of tracking and teaching tracking. I'd like to focus part 2 on a crucial part of Schutzhund (or VPG) tracking, articles. I believe that this is also one of the fundamentals. After all, the description of the task in the trial rules calls Schutzhund tracking "tracking for lost articles". So we better make sure that our dogs have a good grasp of what they are.

Considering how varied the responses are I get from people about what articles should mean, I figure I will just give you my version of it and then go from there. The article concept I will discuss is for dogs who indicate articles and do so by downing at the article.

First principle: An article itself should have no meaning to a dog. It is nothing more than a piece of material. What should have meaning to the dog is the odor of human contact on that piece of material.

Tracking is as I have stated before nose work. That means scent is what the dog is processing. With the endless variety of materials a dog could possibly come across, it would be impossible to effectively teach them the smell of all these materials. The human contact odor is one constant that will always be there and should therefore be the focus of our teaching. I am deliberately using the broad term "human" contact odor, and not the "tracklayer's" contact odor. There are some very gifted dogs in this world who are actually capable of memorizing the odor of one human and comparing that against the odor of other humans. Most dogs are not capable of doing that, they will however be able to identify and indicate objects which have had recent human contact. For the purposes of Schutzhund tracking and police evidence searches this is sufficient.

Second principle: The scent of human contact on an object is an olfactory command to lie down. Read that one a couple of times, it sounds very simple, but try to truly understand what I am trying to say. The smell of human contact on an article a dog finds on a track is a platz command for the dog. Which in this context takes the place of the audible (spoken) command.

I know this sounds a little weird. Think of hand signals for a second though. We can make a dog perform an obedience command by making him obey the verbal command and showing him a hand signal until the hand signal replaces the audible voice command. So if the



sense of hearing command can be replaced by another sense, the sense of sight, why can't it also be replaced by the sense of smell?

I have had a technique to accomplish this for years, and it is still how I do it. But two years ago on a seminar trip to New Zealand, I got together with some of the instructors at the Agriculture

Detector Dog School there and had a great revelation. The Agriculture Detection Dogs learn their work in a very unique way, which is in principle identical to how I teach articles to tracking dogs. The "Beagle Brigade" of the New Zealand Department of Agriculture is world famous for their unbelievable ability to find and indicate all sorts of contraband. From fruits to insect eggs and all you can imagine in between; a very important task in an island nation that tries to remain as disease and pest free as they are at present.

Let me tell you what they do, to give you some food for thought. They begin their training with citrus fruits. So how does a Beagle learn to indicate an orange by sitting for hot dogs? Did you figure it out? The dog is taught to sit as millions of dogs are in obedience classes using hot dogs as the food reward. Then, the scent of an orange is introduced and this scent replaces the audible sit command. And the highly food motivated Beagles that are selected for this work will not miss an opportunity to earn a hot dog.

For me that was a perfect illustration of what I have been trying to teach dogs to do when working articles. The smell itself becomes a command to the dog. Sounds simple, now that I figured it out.

Let's define articles for a tracking dog once again: Articles are obedience, but the command is scent.

Now that we know what we want to teach let's get into how we go about doing that. Articles should not be introduced to a dog until the dog's obedience has advanced to the must stage. What does that mean? A lot of people do puppy obedience, as they should. However, most of that is purely inductive. For the article concept to become a solid one, the dog has to have a reliable platz. And I don't mean that if you hold a hot dog in front of the dog's face and say platz, he lies down really fast. I mean that the dog lies down on command, reliably,



even when he is in the middle of doing something else. I believe to get that kind of platz, a dog requires some level of correction.

What type of correction may vary from a stern voice command to a physical correction with a training collar, but some form of it is necessary. How the obedience exercise platz is taught to a dog varies greatly. My point is that this exercise has to be proficient in the obedience context before it is introduced in tracking. Puppies may track well at a young age, and articles may be the next step. But, they should not be introduced until the obedience has advanced to this stage. If a dog does not yet obey a verbal command reliably, we cannot replace it with a "scent" command.

Since in the teaching of anything new, there may be conflicts and mistakes, we should introduce articles away from the track. Then when the concept begins to take hold in the dog's head, we bring it onto the track. We need about a dozen articles (I like to use at least 4 or more different materials), a dozen fingernail size pieces of the oven dried liver I mentioned in Part 1, a flat collar, a corrective collar, and if possible a person to give us a hand.

Let me jump back to the "Beagle Brigade" for a moment to explain a teaching technique. As I said, the dogs know the sit command, and then the scent of the orange is introduced. How? When a dog's curiosity is triggered, they investigate with their nose. The instructors put an orange into a cardboard box, and move it around. The Beagle investigates the box sniffing it intensely. They sniff the cracks and openings in the box. After a period of this sniffing, the instructors can be assured that the dog has gotten a whiff of orange. At that point they give the sit command. When the dog sits, they reward him for sitting with a piece of food. This process is repeated a number of times and a point will come when the dog sniffs the box and as he registers the smell of the orange inside, he sits on his own. As if he had gotten the command to sit, because in his brain he did. Classical conditioning is great isn't it? Thank you Prof Pavlov!

We will apply this very same concept with our article training. We take our articles and we ensure that there is obvious human odor on them. We do that by spitting on them and rubbing them with our hands and even against our arms. The spit helps, because it already smells human, plus, it allows other scents from our hands to stick better and to be more detectable. We then place them all over a field somewhere

close enough together so we can find them, but far enough apart that the dog has to walk a few steps in between them. We place a single fingernail size piece of liver under each article. I use the liver, because I want to ensure that the dog will register the smell of the human contact odor on the article long before detecting the smell of the liver (that is why hot dogs or cheese is less desirable).

Next we put the dog on the flat collar and have the assistant person go to the first article. The handler walks the dog up to the article, restraining him by the flat collar. The restraint helps to stimulate the dog's curiosity. The assistant points at the article, even taps on it getting the dog interested in it. The handler allows the dog to stretch at it and sniff it. After several strong sniffs, we can assume that the dog has registered the human odor we put on it. At that moment the dog gets a firm platz command. Don't be gingerly here, say it like you say it in obedience, with a bit of a bang to it. The dog downs, the assistant flips the article over and the dog gets his food reward for platzing at the spot he did it at, the article. Praise him "good boy." And on to the next article. Same routine.

Restraint, tapping, sniffing, platz, reward. Be sure to maintain the restraint part of the set up. Handlers sometimes get a little rushed and let go of it too fast. Hold the dog back a bit and control the situation. You can do the same thing alone, without an assistant. But you have to play both roles. You have to hold the dog on the flat collar with one hand, then make him curious by pointing with the other. It still works, but it is a little harder. The corrective collar is there, in case the dog needs a reminder what platz means. But as I said that should not be necessary more than once or twice. By the time you get to the end of this batch of articles, you will see the dog starting to drop as he gets the smell of the article. Of course there are other clues here too, that help, like the pointing and the sight of the article. That is why I said maintain the restraint on the collar. Make sure the dog has to wait and gets to sniff the article before he downs and is rewarded. Sniffing is absolutely essential.

As nifty as this little exercise is, it has its limitations. I rarely repeat this more than 2-3 times as a field exercise. I do not want the dog to make other associations which are not intended. The sight of the article, for example. Also, ensure that you use different materials right from the beginning. Dogs learn to lie down when they smell leather as easily as they do when they learn human contact scent. We should ensure that we set it up so there is only one constant, the human contact odor. If you do this right from the start, you don't

have to practice unconventional articles like metal or plastic or anything else the dog has not encountered before. If it has human odor on it, it means platz in the context of tracking.

After our initial introduction of articles to the dog, we have to bring them onto the track. During tracking the dog is truly working with his nose, and we make sure that the association with the articles will also be one of scent by bringing it into that context. Depending on the tracking stage the dog is at, we place an article at the end of something that is easy for the dog. What I described in Part 1 works great for some dogs, but there maybe some who do not advance very far with that method alone. Some will not go significantly further until after the introduction of articles. So what stage of competency in tracking a dog is at may vary. A single article, with a piece of liver under it at the end of what our dog can competently handle. We let the dog track as he always has, as he gets to the article we will see a reaction. It will look like "Uh-oh, did I just hear a platz?" You have seen that before - you tell your dog to platz a fair distance away, don't say it very loud, he hears it, but isn't quite sure you mean it. So you get that kind of dropping of the shoulders. That is pretty much what you will see on the track when he stumbles across the article. It does register as a platz, but just not that strong. Follow it up with a verbal platz as well to reinforce the replacement command. Then let him get the reward. Some dogs may flip the article over and reward themselves. For those that do not, you flip it over for them and let them have the treat under it. Do this a few times the next few tracks and you will see the dog dropping and rewarding himself.

I hear questions. "Isn't the flipping going to be a problem later?" It would be if it stayed. But it won't stay. The reason this is important is the following. The dog needs to be rewarded where he downs, no better way to do that than to have the food at the article. You have to have the food covered up though and the smell of it too, or the dog can't make the connection we want. When we first teach the dog to down with food, we have it in our hands and give it to them as soon as they move into the down position. But we soon get away from that and reward different and later and change how we reward. All this will take place at the articles too. I will jump ahead here and say that as the dogs proficiency in indicating articles gets better and the reliability of the platz becomes very high, we stop putting food under the article. The dog will flip the articles and find nothing, we then bring the reward to them. In the beginning, the reward will continue to be in the form of food, or in later stages in the form of praising and petting. The dogs will stop flipping the articles because the

expectation of food under it will no longer be maintained and supported. I wanted to add this progression in here because I do not want people to turn off their brains because they worry about potential problems

We have now effectively taught and introduced articles and their indication to the dog. But, we are not finished. The plating at articles is the first piece of what the dog has experienced on the track. So far everything he did has been purely based on his own desires. Naturally that is a bit of a shock to a dog. If we go from the introduction of an article at the end of a track to placing them along the track right away, we will surely cause a problem. An important concept needs to be added into all this and that concept is capping. What is capping? I have touched on this concept in my article "Protection Obedience A Closer Look." And a detailed analysis of the concept is the topic of a future article. But I will give you a sketch of it here.

Capping is the dog's ability to follow the directions of his handler, in other words be obedient, and contain but maintain his drive while doing so. Sounds a lot simpler than it is, especially when the drive of the dog is focused on something that is not coming directly from the handler. The most important exercises of the sport of Schutzhund where capping is difficult but crucial are tracking, retrieving, the send out, and basically all protection obedience.

I can make a dog platz fairly easily if I shut his drive to go forward down completely. Often that is what happens when some of these exercises are taught. The dog tracks nicely in drive. Articles are introduced. Bam! Drive is gone. The dogs do down at the articles, but if they have not learned to cap, their drive shuts down or diminishes to such a degree, that they will not go on tracking with the amount of drive they need to be successful. This is equally true for all the exercises I mentioned above, but I am sticking to tracking in this article.

A dog has to learn that he can stay in drive while being obedient. He does not automatically know that. Often when the must parts of the work start being introduced, the dogs do not see a direct success outcome from following directions. Their drive tells them something different. So they resist. The resistance stops usually when the drive has been lowered to a point where it no longer tells the dog to do something that is in opposition to what the handler's direction says. This happens when I tell my dog to platz as much as when anybody

else does it with his dog. Knowing that it happens makes the difference. And then taking the time to make sure a dog can cap is what in the end makes the difference.

Do little exercises with your dog. Make him lie down, put his toy in front of his feet, let him lie there for a bit and "stew" so to speak. Then give him the go ahead to grab the toy. See the toy is not coming from you now, it is right there in front of the dog. He has to listen and stay in drive. Or you will see that he is not as intense when he grabs the toy, or he can't stand to look at it anymore, because he can't stay down and be stimulated by the sight of the toy. Work with this until you get good intensity and reliable downing. Then tell the dog to sit from the down. Most will bolt at the toy. No punishment please. The dog is just not getting it yet, and his brain is so high on "toy" that he does not differentiate your words clearly. Patience.

Make the dog sit before giving him his food, ask him to bark, then tell him to sit quiet again. Reward when he follows your direction clearly. Do not make it too complex in the beginning. This is not easy for dogs. Ask the dog to down and stop eating while eating his meal. When he does, tell him to go back to eating. Now please don't bug the hell out of your dogs every time they eat. And don't turn into "nags" either. All in good measure.

Work a dog on a square, tell him platz, then "such" again, gauge how fast and intense he goes back to work on the square. The idea is that an obedience command does not have to shut down drive. It will in the beginning, because it often takes influence from us to make the dog who is in drive obey our commands. But if we show him that following direction does not mean the end of drive, it just means an interruption, then we are teaching capping.

Make sure you do these things with your dogs. They will allow you to see if your dog can cap at least a little before you bring articles onto the track in places other than the end. And if you have a dog who worked well within the parameters of what I said in part 1, then you can start placing articles on the track. In the beginning still with food under them. You will see the down reaction, help them out with a command to ensure they down completely, walk up, reward, and let them continue the track from there. Dogs who didn't do so well with the food only method I described in Part 1, can still learn articles and learn to do them on simple tracks (for those dogs that may mean just straights, no corners). You may even find as they learn to cap better, they will re-gather some of the food drive that seems to be dwindling

as tracks get too long. That will then allow you to stretch the tracks out a bit further.

Tracking training is by no means finished with the introduction of articles. We still have to discuss dogs who need to be motivated through things other than food. We have added a small portion of duty to the track by introducing articles. But there is still more we need to do to put it all together so we can feel that we have a reliable dutiful tracking dog. I hope you will join me again when I try to shed a little light on those aspects of the work.