

Tracking

by Sgt. Rick Fackrell - Chief Instructor Toronto Police Dog Services

Training a dog to track this is the misconception that a lot of people have. We in fact do not teach a dog to do something that they have been doing for generations to survive prior to us humans taking them and making us look good when they capture the bad guys.

What we try to do with them is alter their way of using their nose. So instead of tracking animals we condition them to track human prey. We do this by making them believe it is more rewarding and fun. This is not always easy to do and this is where your correct selection of the dog is so important. I like to think that everyone reading these and previous articles knows how to pick out a dog for police service and that one of the most important tests is how the dog uses its nose.

Motivate Motivate Motivate

I am assuming that everyone reading this knows the basics of the crushed vegetation and rafts of skin from the human body so we do not have to go into that.

Any one that has read my previous articles knows that my whole training philosophy centers around that piece of rubber called a KONG. I know some people do not agree with me but you do what works for you. Some trainers use food as their motivater and I see nothing wrong with it as I have on occasion used this method especially when it comes to Malinois's. I learned this from John Skalski a heavy duty malinois trainer. I do not have a decoy at the end of the track until the last week of the course. The dog will only get two tracks with the decoy at the end. The reason is that we do not want our dogs lifting their heads whenever they track near a tree, bush or fence as they are likely to leave the track to check them out. This could cause the dog to lose the track and the handler may not be able to get the dog back on the track. You might say if you do not practice with the decoy at the end of the track the dog may not know what to do when it finds a suspect. My answer to that is that the dog on the open search has been taught to bark when it finds a suspect so why would it be any different when it finds a suspect on a track.

Weather conditions that affect scent:

"Good" conditions:

- mild dull weather
- high humidity
- ground warmer than the air
- light rain can enhance scent

"Bad conditions"

- hot sun
- strong winds
- heavy rain
- air warmer than the ground

Snow or frost can affect scent by either destroying or preserving it. What happens depends on whether the snow or frost occurs before or after the scent was laid.

Track Components:

Remember, there are five components to a track:

- Track layer
- Start
- Scent
- Direction
- End

Track Laying:

I have heard it said that the person who has laid the track should not go with the handler when the dog is tracking as the dog may turn to go back towards the track layer and thereby cause the handler to correct the dog. In over 25 years of laying tracks and following the teams, I have never had this happen. Some people seem to have trouble walking in a straight line, and that is why it is important to pick out a point on the landscape and walk towards it. These identifications should be written down so that when you return you can inform the handler which points you walked to. A map should be made every time you lay a track. As humans, we sometimes forget exactly where we have walked to.

In training, when a dog is tracking, it must win no matter what. On the street, you may do many tracks that do not come to a successful conclusion for some reason and the dog does not get his "reward". This is why it is so important in training the dog must get to the end of the track and get it's "reward". This also renews the handlers confidence in the dog on the track when he knows the dog has been successful. I think you can understand why it is very important that you as the track layer know where and how the track was laid.

Reading your dog on a track:

It is very important when tracking that the handler is able to correctly read the dog. This is by closely watching as it goes down the track. Does it keep its nose right down as it tracks? When it goes off the track, does it lift its head as though to say "where has it gone"? Does it carry its tail in a certain way when it is on the track? The handler must learn to recognize these traits to be successful as a handler. Some handlers in training have a hard job learning to not only read their dog but also will not trust their dog on a track because they think they know better than the four legged furry animal at the other end of the 30 ft. line. They think my buddy wouldn't lay me a track through there. Well of course his buddy did and the handler had pulled his dog off the track. The moral of the story is "DO NOT THINK FOR YOUR DOG".

When I have a handler who has a problem of not trusting their dog then I lay a track and have the handler harness the dog. I then blindfold the handler and tell them to give the dog the command to track. I can tell you they soon learn to trust their dog.

Line Handling:

The handler must also, while tracking, learn how to handle the tracking line. Tension should be kept on the line when the dog is tracking and should not be allowed to fall below the dog's back. The handler's hands should be kept at waist level or higher, especially when the dog comes to a turn and has to cast around to pick up the turn. You should keep the line up and slide it through your hands as the dog must not get tangled up in the line. I have seen a lot of handler's lower the line when the dog is casting and as it crosses over it gets the scent and starts to track it's leg gets caught in the line. This could have a very serious affect on your

dog as it may think of it as a correction and shut down on you.

The tracking line is used not only to keep in physical contact with the dog, but is a communication link between the dog and handler. You will find, if used correctly, the line will make you sensitive to the dog's movements and that good line handling will have an affect on how good a tracker the dog will be.

Scent Work:

Before attempting to do any form of scent work with the dog (tracking, open search, article search), the dog should be taken out of the vehicle and allowed to relieve itself. This short period also gives the dog time to clear its nasal passages. Do not rush to begin working your dog on a track. If necessary, give the dog some water. This is especially important on a hot summer's day. If the dog's mucous membranes are not moist, the dog will not perform as well as it can.

If the handler sees that the dog is having a difficult time picking up a scent then the dog's nose should be checked to make sure it is moist.

The bottom line is always have water available for your dog.

Hard Surface Tracking:

This is an exercise that some think cant be done. There is no secret to it as I start the same way as I do for tracking on vegetation.

It does take longer and a lot of patience. To get the dog to keep his nose down on pavement you can lay down small washers, rice or wieners.

You can also start on gravel roads where the scent will have some thing to keep it down. You also start the same way you would do for vegetation tracking..

Another way is to start on vegetation on the side of a road, go down some 50 paces then move onto the road for about 20ft. then back on to vegetation. Carry on this way until you are doing more road than vegetation. After some time you will be starting on the pavement and the whole track will be the same.

Do not expect this to happen quickly as hard surface tracking takes a lot of time and patience.

Operational Tracking:

- 1. Question informant. This is usually a patrol officer who will point out the last point that he saw the suspect. The most important question to ask him is "Did you go past that point"? They will sheepishly tell you they did but if you do not ask they will not usually volunteer the information instead wait until you have tracked them around three yards and back to where you started.
- 2. Relieve the dog and give it water, nasal passages should be moist.
- 3. Make sure you have a cover officer.
- 4. Make sure you inform your cover officer of exactly what you require the officer to do.

- 5. Harness up the dog and cast it out to track.

I hope this short article on Tracking will be of help to some one. If you wish to know more or require help then please don't hesitate to contact me.

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