

# Starting Tracking... On the "Right" Foot



By USRC Judge Andreas Mueller of Zauberberg K9 Academy

info@zauberberg.com

www.zauberberg.com

Sometimes trainers train and train, and forget to focus on the final performance that their training should produce. So let us take a quick look at what is required to get the score we desire.

What are the requirements given by the Rule Book (SchH1)?

*Tracking a 300 pace track at least 20 minutes old. Indicate two articles (one on the second leg- one at the very end). Dog should indicate Articles by picking them up or pointed them out (laying down, sitting or standing). 10 meter (33 feet) tracking lead, or tracking without a lead. The lead is attached to either a tracking - or Boettcher harness, or the collar. The track has two 90 degree turns. The handler lays the track as indicated by the judge*

A person laying a track is 1) leaving a personal scent and 2) injures the ground while moving across the surface. Studies have shown years ago (Konrad Most) that the individual scent left by a person is not the scent that a dog follows when tracking. Rather, he follows the injury of the ground that takes place when the person is moving across the surface. It was proven by Konrad Most when he pulled a wheel with an overhead tie and wooden feet attached across the surface. The dog tracked the track just fine - no human scent involved. To further prove that the dog does not go just for human scent, he had a person being moved in a lift across the surface without touching the ground - the dog did not track.

Conclusion of the above study:

The number one thing we need to accomplish is to have the dog interested in the injury of the ground that a person leaves via foot prints when moving along laying the track.

The interest in the ground scent is created through a combination of the presence of the ground scent and food. Food drive and useage of the nose are naturally combined.

The dog needs to be conditioned to associate:  
no scent = no food (not reinforced = not worthwhile)  
scent present = food (reinforced = worthwhile)

A word about signals that puts behaviors and motivation in drive. Anything that is officially allowed, or is even a requirement, given by the rule book should be utilized as drivers to create the or support the tracking behavior

1. There is a 33 foot tracking leash required
2. There is a special harness (Boettcher harness) that is put on the dog in a very special way allowed
3. There is a "check in" with the judge required before you start the track
4. There are articles to be found on the track required
5. There will be distractions possible that the dog will



have to be accustomed to; or better yet, that he should also receive as a driver to perform

Keep in mind that training should start as young as possible. A small sized dog is much easier to manipulate (handle) compared to a big dog. Also, the very young dog might pay attention to detail as everything is new to him.

Handling an adult dog can require trainers to heavily manipulate the dog, which means that they have to apply a certain amount of force. Any kind of force or restrain might prevent learning, or might make it much more difficult than without. Any discomfort in connection with learning anything, will make certain subjects of learning unpleasant. This will lead to reluctance to learn a subject. Learning should be mostly driven by the possibility of satisfying a desire.

How to create the very first connection:

Choose the same field for tracking each time as it helps with soliciting the behavior of tracking. Utilize some smelly food that your dog likes a lot. If the food smells strong, the nose will be attracted, and that is exactly what we want to do! Canned food (kept in the fridge to harden it a bit) , placed with a spoon or knife, can work very well.

Back tie your dog to a tree or fence post, or even the car will do. Show him the treats in a dish and leave him. Step on the field and make a round scent pad about 4 feet in diameter. Stick a tracking flag to the left side of the scent pad. If you

have a puppy that is very playful, choose a marker that is not desired to play with, such as a metal tracking shield. The marker will be associated as a signal for the dog learning what behavior at this sign is most promising to be rewarded. Place about 5-10 pieces of food all over the pad. A few of those pieces about 5 inches away from the boarder to the inside of the pad. Use the same way you came onto the tracking field when you are leaving the pad. There should only be ONE path. As you want the dog to find out that there is no reason (no scent to follow) to leave the pad.



Go back to get your dog. While he is still tied out, make a big deal of unrolling the 33 foot leash. Then put the harness on. If available to you, it would be great to have a person that you briefly go and see on the way to your scent pad. This would be the judge. Yes your dog will be distracted and excited about him. But he will definitely realize that after all this, 33 foot leash, harness and third person....he is going to find some food! That is fantastic! After a few couplings of these events you will have the three drivers that will always be there in the trial, in place to get him into the motivation that you want. Lead him to the scent pad calmly, holding him by your side. Just because you have the tracking leash attached, does not mean you have to use the whole leash. Stand on the path leading to the pad - thus he should not be able to follow the scent going off the field away from the pad. So there is no possibility for him to discover scent without reward.

Do not point or influence in any way. Once you are at the scent pad (in front of it) carefully let him slide forward. Give him about 5-7 feet of leash. It is very helpful to have the wind (if any) going toward you and your dog. Thus, the scent of the food and disturbed surface is realized before actually stepping onto the pad. Now, let the dog operate. Do not hold him on the pad. If he wants to leave, give him slightly more leash and let him find out that there is no food if there is no scent - and that there is food once he is back on the scent pad. Once he has picked up all of the treats, I suggest you pick him up and carry him off the field (if you are training a puppy). If you train an adult dog, give him a release cue that he might know such as YES or OK, and run him off the field.

After a few repetitions, he should show obvious signs of getting a clear idea of ground scent being combined with food. You should observe him leaving the scent pad slightly and then immediately coming back on it. By now,

he should recognize the situation as soon as you go to get him and lead him onto the field where the flag is. He will show searching behavior. As soon as it is highly predictable that he will search at the scent pad, give the cue that you want to be connected to tracking, such as "such" or "search".

Once the behavior predictable, proceed to take the next step. Follow the same procedure; but, when laying the track, leave the scent pad forward. Take about ten steps. Make sure your feet are put almost in front of each other (no offset) while walking - not beside each other. Thus, a forward motion will be created. Place a treat in each foot print. After about ten paces you create another scent pad, similar to the one at the start. Five to ten food droppings on it. Again he should not be hindered from going forward off the scent pad. Here again he should find out on his own that there is no food if he leaves the scent source.

The reason for just training a scent pad to begin with is that we do only want to create a scent - food association, not a forward driving motion. If you traditionally start with a straight line, the dog creates too much of a strong drive to run forward. The same reason to have another scent pad at the end instead of a huge reward that will draw too much drive toward the end.

The way it is described above provides an evenly distributed attraction, throughout the track. Every little piece of the complex behavior is rewarded. It has much more emphasis on connecting ground scent with food reward than to just run forward. The dog will learn to use his nose with much more consciousness.

The number of foot prints leading from the first scent pad to the second will be increased every repetition. It will also connect the two scent pads in different directions. Meaning, that the track leaving the first scent pad will not just go straight out - it will go slightly left or right and then end up on the second scent pad.

Now, we will add another leg and another scent pad. Scent pad - leg - scent pad - leg scent pad.

The scent pads should be getting smaller as the whole track gets longer. Less food on the pads. Every foot step has a treat on it.

By using the above elements (scent pads and straight lines), we should present all different shapes and lengths of a track. First leg short - second short - third long, etc. Switch those elements around so that the dog does not get used to a certain distance before changing directions. The straight leg leaving a scent pad should also vary in direction or angle.

The change of direction off a scent pad is helping the dog to find out that he is not "on" it as he leaves the scent pad (lots of scent), going into nothing if he takes the wrong direction. Just as it was in the very beginning on from the "start pad".

While we are working our way up in lengths of the track, we will change the sequence of reinforcement (treat) to every third foot step. Thus, the dog will find food on alternate sides. It is important to keep the way of walking in a forward direction not putting the feet side to side to far. If you do, it would almost be like two tracks. Most dogs miss a foot print if the foot prints are to far apart side ways. The rhythm of reinforcement should in no way be interrupted. That means that it is very easy for the dog to follow going forward with

slide offset, finding reinforcement. If you discover that the dog is skipping foot prints and reinforcers, it is most likely because the foot prints are spaced too far from one side to the other.

By now, the dog has to sniff (follow) two foot prints without food in it. If he follows the track without any problems, we will extend to treating every fifth foot print. It means that now the distance between treats has been extended, but we make sure that food will be found in foot prints of alternate sides again, given by the sequence of uneven number. Since the reinforcement is on a set schedule, there is no trigger for the dog to think at what point or moment he is going to reach reinforcement. The behavior of tracking is reinforced very direct and continuously.

After repetitions, and the dog having developed a strong habit and rhythm, we should start the track on a schedule of "every third", going to "every fifth" then "every seventh" placing the treats. In the middle of the track create a window with no reinforcement that is predictably easy and short for him to go through without confusion (10 steps), then pyramid down from "every seventh", to "every fifth", "every third" step treating again toward the last scent pad at the end.



Last, and final step, is to get rid of the reinforcement throughout the track!

The behavior of tracking has been very strongly established going through the steps described above.

It needs to be pointed out that we have to make sure to raise our criteria rather quickly when going through the process of teaching the track.

It needs to be avoided to have the dog starting to be depending on being reinforced all the time with that high of a frequency. He needs to learn to follow the track in order to get to his reward. In other words we need to create more endurance of the behavior.

Take a small Tupperware dish with a lid and fill it with the dog's food. Do not let the dog watch. He is already conditioned to the procedure, what to do and what to expect. If you let him watch now, you take a chance that he will start to "look" and not to track.

Put the flag as usual to the left of the scent pad that you are about to make. Bury the food dish in the ground without creating a big hump. Now, step back off the scent

pad the way you entered it and get your dog. Lead him to the scent pad and use your cue for tracking. He will sniff and find the dish. Help him to get it out and open it for him on the ground and let him eat.

Repeat the procedure and start burying the dish 5 paces out. It is important that you do not make the ground look different at the spot that the dish is buried at. Of course, you cannot hide the dish without greater injury of the ground- thus you should try to create a number of visible spots throughout. If you track in dirt make sure you create plenty of spots that look just like the one that the dish is actually buried at. Now he will start operating at those spots because he identifies those as "landmarks" - but will not find anything. The only difference at the spot where he will find the dish is, that he could smell it! He will learn to use his nose, and his nose only, to get to his reward, as long as we make sure that there is nothing else he can go by.

The final step is to hide the dish at different places on the track. For now, I suggest to "forward- chain". He finds the dish at 5 paces, then at 15 paces then at 25 paces and so on, until it will be at the very end of the track that he has performed before with all the food on it. Watch carefully, going through this process, and realize if the dog begins to go a distance with a habit and not with intensity. That is the time when you will have to take it back and surprise him with an "early" find. If built up carefully, the dog should get to the spot of anticipation, it is not there, he will try harder to find it, utilizing the skill you have taught him.

Why not do this from the beginning?

If we start out by having him track for his reward without establishing an excellent searching behavior, we take a chance to develop high, inconsistent speed and way too much desire to get to the end. That would lead to more influence necessary by the trainer to correct the wrongly developed behaviors!

Even after having taught excellent searching behavior, it takes extra care NOT to fall into the trap of creating landmarks that show the dog where his reinforcement is and how to get there in a different way - but to search with his nose.

Never give him a chance to locate the reward with his eyes.

Never show him where it is (the track or the reward)

It is the dog that has to find it. If he does not, you might have made it too difficult for his level of training.

At the conclusion of this article, I would like to mention that this is one way of teaching tracking that has been working for me.

I point out that teaching is to show the dog what to do. After he knows the behaviors, you will have to start training.

Training means to secure the learned behaviors as much as possible against failure and distractions. Be aware that there are distractions that might be naturally much stronger than the reward given will ever be!

Happy learning as always.

Andreas Mueller

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