



ACTIVITY: WORKING TRIALS

SEARCH SQUARES

Following on from the nosework theme from the last article, after the track comes the search square.

In competition both the track and the square take place on a separate piece of ground for each dog, and usually the track is worked first followed by the square laid over the tracked ground. However, this is at judges' discretion and some opt for working the square first, which means finding an extra piece of ground so as not to spoil the track, although the square should be laid on foiled ground.

Perhaps now would be a good time to explain what a search square is, and the reasoning behind it. When a dog is asked to track it is required to follow a line of ground scent in a controlled way, without deviating from it or being influenced by the wind.

That is one type of nosework, but the search is something quite different, as here the dog is required to use the wind to help locate lost articles, so as to prove that it can use both methods of scenting.

A search square is an area of ground marked out by four corner posts and into which a steward places some articles out of sight of dog and handler.

The test commences when the handler sends the dog into the square to locate and retrieve the articles, which are usually not easy to see. The size of square and number and size of articles to find as well as the time allowed is determined by the level of the stake, but the principle remains the same in that the dog must find the articles and the handler remain outside of the square. The handler is allowed to encourage their dog and to move around the outside of the square, but the location of articles is purely down to the dog, and the team is marked not only on the number of articles recovered, but also on the way the square was worked both by the dog and the handler.

When starting out with a new pup it is usual to teach the search before tracking as finding articles is an integral part of both tests, and the pup is ready to use its nose far sooner within the freedom of a search than under the control of a track.

Puppies as young as ten weeks will happily play the 'find' game, which is the basis for its future searching, and it is easy to turn this game into the more formal exercise later on. With all trials the importance of articles cannot be over stressed, as it is the dog's desire for these 'bits of rubbish' that makes it keep searching or tracking when conditions are hard, and so the groundwork put in to make articles the most exciting things in the dog's life is time well spent.



BOX OF DELIGHTS

When I know I am having a new pup I find a box with a lid to act as a toy box and fill it with all manner of peculiar items. These will include cardboard tubes, pieces of cloth, carpet and lino, one or two metal objects and some wooden and plastic ones as well. These 'toys' must be small enough for the pup to carry but not too small to play with, as the handler's job is to make these things 'come alive' and be of interest to the pup.

I try to give my new pup ten minutes of quality time twice a day when it can be alone with me in the house and play with the items in the box.

I bring the pup into the kitchen and while it watches me I bring out the box, telling the pup that we are going to play with the 'toys' and making the whole thing sound really exciting.

With a very young pup I sit on the floor with the box and while it watches I lift the lid and look in the box and, sounding as if I have found something wonderful, I take out one of the articles and make it 'come alive'.

This can be done by the handler throwing and catching it, pulling it along the floor or pretending it is moving in their hands, or a combination of all of these, whatever it takes to get the pup's interest without giving it the article.

Once the pup is really watching and wanting the article it can be dropped and the pup be allowed to pounce on it close to the handler who should, without taking the article from the pup, fuss and cuddle it and tell it how clever it is.

The handler should then gently retrieve the article, tease the pup with it again and repeat the procedure.

After a couple of goes, the article should be replaced in the box and another taken out with all the same play-acting and a repeat of the game.

It is important for the pup to realise that it is the handler that makes the article exciting so that they try very hard to play with them rather than run off with it. However, a more possessive pup may want to own the article, and if this is the case the handler needs to position themselves in such a way that the pup will need to be fairly close to them and cannot run away with it.

The object of this game is firstly to convince the pup that whatever comes out of the box is wonderful, but also that it is much more exciting to play with their handler than on their own. This is down to the skill of the handler and how good they are at making their pup believe that the articles are worth having, but it is the basis for all article recovery in the future, so it must be worked at and should not be underestimated.

I believe in keeping these sessions very short so as to keep the pup's interest, but as soon as they are keen on the game I vary it, so that I start to 'hide' the articles in full sight of the pup, firstly about my person as I sit on the floor, and by swiftness of hand can make it disappear behind my back or underneath my legs. It is then, if the pup's desire has been sufficiently built, that you will hear their little nose cut in as they start to use their inborn skill to locate the object of their desire.

This is a very difficult task as I am asking the pup to find an article I have been handling, and is hidden on me, so is saturated with my scent and yet even at this young age pups seem to be able to discriminate between my scent and that of its article.

Once the pup is using its nose this game can move on very quickly and in what seems like no time at all the dog can be sent in to a room to find articles previously hidden and then can move on to the garden with articles hidden behind plants and in rockeries etc. Only when the dog is happily searching open ground with no restrictions and finding articles without direction do I introduce a formal square, and then I don't try to restrict my dog to the square but allow it to discover for itself that there is nothing to find outside of the marked area.

A FAVOURITE GAME

If enough groundwork has been done, and the dog convinced that these items are worth finding, both by the game the handler plays and their pleasure in the find, then it will move from the toy box kitchen game to the full blown search square with the same attitude and enjoyment that it had as a tiny puppy, and this will always be one of its favourite games. Only if pressure is brought to bear and the dog starts to understand failure will things go wrong, and that is down to the handler.

So in practise always load the training in the dog's favour so that it is virtually impossible for it to fail, and in competition walk away from a failure with a smile and a pat for the dog, and go home and make it easy again, so the dog continues to believe in itself.

This applies to all the training and if you can keep the dog's attitude right, then in spite of failure the dog will always come out expecting to succeed, and that is what makes a good working dog.

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