



## ACTIVITY: WORKING TRIALS

### TRACKING

### TEACHING TRACKING

Following on from the overview of working trials I thought it would be a good idea to write a bit about the various exercises and how to train them. That said, it is a well known fact that the only thing two dog trainers agree on is that the other one is wrong, so this is merely my opinion and not a definitive answer to working trials training.

Tracking forms the basis of almost every stake this would seem a good place to start and so I will do my best to try to explain what it is all about and how to train it.

Probably the first and most important thing for us to know is that we don't train our dogs to track, they can already do that, and do it well. What we do is inspire them to track for us, under control and in a way we can understand. If we watch a young pup running loose sooner or later we will see a display of natural tracking and once we recognise what they are doing it is awesome to see how good they are.

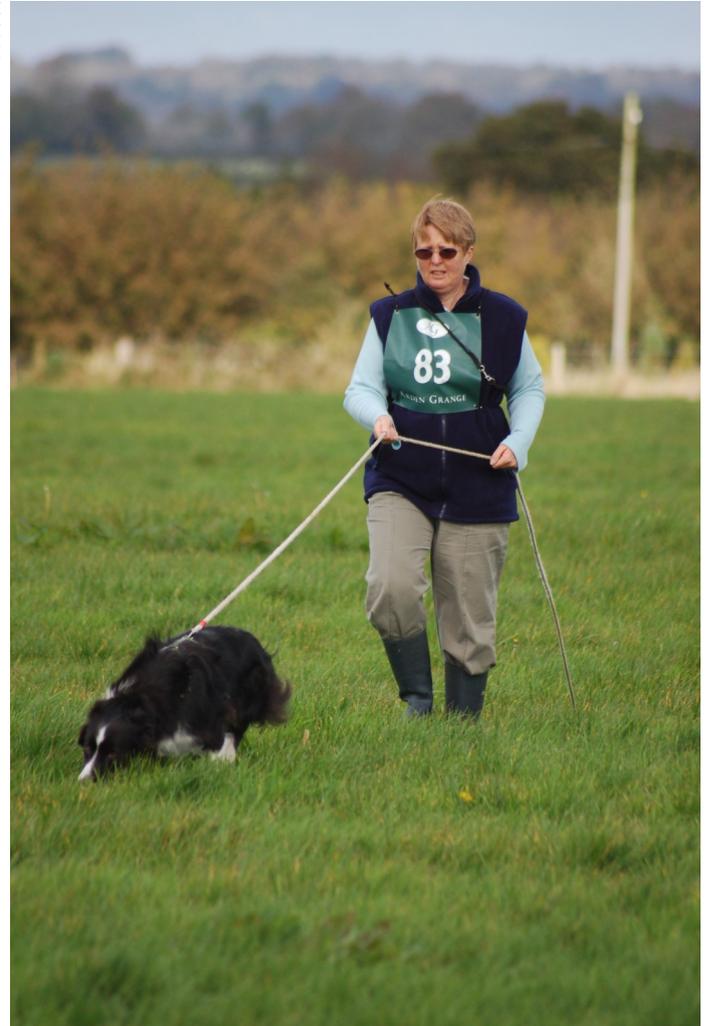
Even a very young pup will drop its nose and follow an invisible game trail and their concentration and commitment to the track is amazing, so it is obvious that this is not just something they can do but something they actually enjoy. The trick for the trainer is to manipulate that ability without losing the enthusiasm – no easy task.

### GROUND DISTURBANCE

Perhaps it would be a good idea at this point to explain what a track is as I am sure there are many misconceptions about what exactly happens when a track is laid. Basically, a track is just a walked line, nothing is dragged or laid other than occasional articles for the dog to find, and so what the dog is asked to follow is ground disturbance caused by the act of walking.

This can consist of crushed vegetation and a certain amount of skin debris/hair shed by the walker and is therefore very subtle and usually invisible to the human eye, although obviously walking in mud, snow or long grass can leave a visible impression.

When competition tracks are laid the track layer walks a pre-determined pattern as instructed by the judge, on a fresh piece of ground for each dog, and lays articles along the way, ending with a final article which marks the end of the track. This is then left to age for the required amount of time and then the track layer watches the competitor work to assist the judge determine how accurately the dog is tracking.



A track pattern is made up of straight or diagonal lines or 'legs' with a series of turns making the pattern more or less complex according to the level of the stake. At the lowest level this can be a simple pattern of around eight or ten legs with no diagonals and left to age for just 30 minutes; while at the highest level the track can have as much as 30 legs of varying lengths with some of just ten paces and with diagonals and cut backs as well as straight legs, and this is left for three hours making it far more difficult.

Even though a dog appears to be able to track at a very young age this does not mean that they are ready to learn the more controlled version that we require, and so the age to start tracking training varies tremendously between individual dogs. While some may be ready to start baby tracks at just a few weeks, others can be several months or even a year old before they show any interest.

There are as many ways of starting a dog off as there are dog trainers, but most of us agree that the most important thing to teach the dog is the joy of articles.

This is what motivates the dog to go on trying when the conditions are hard and the weather awful and so it is essential to ensure, long before you come to the tracking field, that dog really wants what you are going to ask him to track for.

We usually try to choose very good ground such as thick damp grass to start a dog off although there are many schools of thought on this, with some trainers preferring to teach the dog to track on poor ground so that in later life it is confident on difficult ground and sees anything easier as a bonus.

My choice of ground is as much about me as the dog, as when I am training a new pup I like to see where the track goes and this is possible on lush grass. I try not to use long grass as this just teaches the pup to keep its head up, and I want the nose as deep as possible, and for this reason I always start off with tiny pieces of food along the track to encourage the pup to keep his nose into the ground in the hope of finding a tiny morsel.

So to start off with I bring the pup out on a lead and once I have reached the point where I am to track I put the harness on the dog but re-attach the lead to the collar and leave the line ready to put on. I either tie the pup up or get someone to hold it and after putting in a start pole I walk in a straight line away from the post allowing the dog to watch me, and making it clear that I have a favourite toy which the pup wants.

I only walk about 15-20 paces and make a play of putting the toy on the ground several times along the way. In addition to this I will have laid a tiny morsel of food at the base of the start pole and every couple of paces as I go. I also scuff my feet slightly as I walk to make a visible impression on the grass. Once I have laid the toy I go back to the dog in an arc so as not to contaminate the track, attach the line to the harness and encourage the dog to go forward with the command that I will use for the rest of its tracking life. For me that is 'where does it go?' but it can be anything from 'track on' to the old fashioned 'zoo', whatever comes naturally.

If the pup shows no inclination to do anything and just stands looking confused then it is probably not ready and I would put it away and try again in a few weeks, but if it moves cautiously forward, discovers the food at the pole and then makes the decision to move forward again, albeit hesitantly, then you are on your way.

## For Further Information on Working Trials (WT) Visit:

<https://www.workingtrials.info/>

<https://www.thekennelclub.org.uk/events-and-activities/working-trials/>

## WHILE THE COGS TURN

The art of tracking for the handler is patience, and allowing the dog to work it out for themselves without interference is the biggest part of the lesson. Standing still and watching while the cogs turn in the little brain can seem like wasted time but this is how the pup learns. It will not be long before he has got the hang of it and is towing you up the line to his toy, hardly bothering to stop for the food.

At this point, depending on the dog, you can stop the food but needless to say the reward at the end is finding the toy and having the game, so it is up to the handler to make the toy 'come alive' and be worth finding.

That is the basis of track training the pup and the steps that follow just expand his knowledge. Once you have a dog that will come out to the track without seeing it laid and track confidently for about 100 yards to his toy without stopping or casting it is time to teach a corner and I initially do this from the pole.

Put the start pole in just as before but go off in another direction rather than straight. It is really interesting to watch the youngster come to the pole, shoot off straight and then realise there is no track, and then you will see him work out his first corner. This is a major breakthrough and proves to the handler that the dog is actually tracking and not just running out to where he thinks you have left the toy.

From here on in it is just hours of practice and once the corner at the post is mastered a turn can be added at the end of the first leg and so on until you are laying a full pattern. The secret is to keep up the motivation by laying plenty of articles and varying the length of legs so the dog is never sure where a reward will come. Going out in all weathers and on different terrains will add to the dog's experience and build his confidence and then the day will come when you can ask someone else to lay your track and see if he will take you round when you don't know where it goes.

Finally, the three golden rules of tracking:

1. **Lay your own track for most of the time and be sure that you know exactly where it goes.**
2. **If you cannot remember your track do not put your dog on it.**
3. **When you do want to try someone else's track make sure they are experienced tracklayers and they know where it goes.**

There are lots of other things to learn such as 'reading' your dog and line handling but these are things that you may need help with but all will become clear with time and no amount of instruction can replace practical experience.

So even if you are not aiming to compete or even do full tracks you might enjoy seeing what your dog can do and starting the basics and perhaps this will inspire you. Have fun!

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