

Tracking is all about using the wonderful scenting ability of the dog's nose – but what's so wonderful about that nose?

The dog uses soft tissue, bones, nerves, and parts of the brain to handle scent. Bones and soft tissue form spaces into which odours flow. These spaces are lined with scent receptor cells which connect to specific scent nerves that are directly routed to the scent centre of the dog's brain.

The dog's mucous membranes inside their nose contain more than 200 million scent receptors (compared to areas in humans containing about 5 million). Their olfactory bulbs are also about 4 times larger than ours. However, some breeds are better suited for scent work than others – dogs with longer snouts have more room for and thus more scent-receptors than do short-snouted dogs.

So what is tracking and how can we use that wonderful nose?

Tracking is getting your dog to follow the scent of one person across a variety of terrain with a number of changes of direction. The dog must ignore the scents of other animals, or other people and remain faithful to that one scent. Most dogs LOVE tracking – particularly because they're in charge! Dogs as wide-ranging as Dachshunds, Jack Russell Terriers, Dobermans, Rottweilers, Dalmatians, Soft Coated Wheaten Terriers, Japanese Spitz, Beagles and Border Terriers have joined the usual parade of working dogs and gundogs that excel at this sport.

Like any other training exercise, the idea is to start small and be positive. As we have about 40 times less scenting capability than our dog, we can't reprimand it when we get an action we don't want – do you know to which odours your dog just reacted? The best approach is to encourage the scenting behaviour you want and ignore the scenting behaviour you don't want.

A number of obedience clubs have tracking arms, and the Tracking and Rescue Dog Club of NSW offers tracking training to members.

Dogs NSW runs competitive tracking trials through its affiliated clubs, using the ANKC Rules for Tracking Trials. Through successful tracking, your dog can earn the titles of Tracking Dog, Tracking Dog Excellent with titles of TD and TDX after its name. Your dog can, with a lot of work from both of you, become a Tracking Champion, with CH (T) preceding its name. Recently new disciplines (and titles) of Track and Search have been added, so that your champion tracking dog can continue to track.

Tracking in NSW is done only in the winter months to avoid excessive heat (and the snakes that go with it). Once your dog has passed the beginner stage it will wear a harness so that its breathing is not impaired by a collar. To give your dog room to move, it will track on a 10-metre lead.

Tracking takes up a lot of ground, with tracks ranging from 500 metres to 1200 metres – the tracking fraternity is always searching for land within easy driving-distance of Sydney. Tracking is also wonderfully supportive - everyone at a trial on the day is trying to complete a successful track, and all are thrilled when a dog and handler team does so.

Tracking is one of the hardest disciplines you can do with your dog – it requires regular training, early starts and lots of travelling to remote tracking grounds. You'll get wet and cold, and have to push your way through heavy grass and brush – so a general level of fitness is required. However, the thrill of working with your dog at the peak of its skill is indescribable. As a challenging and enjoyable activity, it can't be beaten.

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