

Starting Tracking

How do you get your dog to track? You have a dog with the most marvellous nose – how do we focus this and get the dog to use its nose to track?

Two techniques are shown here to start tracking. If problems arise, chat to an expert from your local tracking club.

Equipment

A flat buckle collar is fine at first. If you have a slip collar, attach the lead to the dead ring so that the collar doesn't tighten. When you get more advanced, you may wish to invest in a tracking harness like the one in the picture – so that the dog can work comfortably. These are available in leather and other materials.

Your standard 2-metre lead will be fine initially, although you will eventually need a 10-metre tracking lead.

A flag is used at the start, so that you can see it from a distance. Some make these from wooden dowel, others a heavy piece of wire, yet others use the posts for electric fences. You need a height of about 1 metre. Attach a bright piece of material or bunting to it for visibility.

Training your dog to track will be easier with another person around. So find a friend – and you can train together.

Finally get some socks – dirty ones, so that your scent is on them. Natural fibres hold scent best, but now, just get some of your dirty socks.

Reward

The next thing is to find a reward that really excites your dog.

You know your dog best - is your dog more excited by food, a toy, or you? Your rewards should be something of high value to the dog, not usually available, such as barbeque chicken, cabanossi or slices of roast meat. If a toy, then one that the dog really likes, but not normally available (I have a battery-powered singing dancing ball that drives my dog ballistic, but she can only find it at the end of tracks nowadays).

Technique

Pick a nice day with only a slight breeze. Find a place with unmown grass, and with few distractions. Plan a track of 30 to 40 metres into the wind, with a sightline such as a particular tree, post or building.

Place your dog so it can see you lay the track – it can be tied up, in your car or held by your friend.

Wave the reward at the dog, calling it. Take the reward about 3 metres in front of the dog, plant your flag, and march up and down on the spot for about 30 seconds to lay what is called a scent-pad. Drop a dirty sock on top of the

scent pad, and start walking in a straight line for about 40 metres towards your sightline. Every few feet wave the reward at your dog and call it.

Now the technique varies, depending upon whether you have food or a toy as a reward or yourself.

If food/toy, wave the reward at the dog, place it on the ground with another dirty sock, and walk back to the dog to take control of it. If the reward is you, drop into the grass and hide.

The handler should then encourage the dog out towards the reward. Generally the dog will pull strongly towards the reward. It should be praised by the handler and encouraged. When the dog finds the reward it should be praised and encouraged effusively, as well as getting to play with or eat the reward.

Repeat this once or twice per session on unused ground, with up to 3 sessions per week, gradually decreasing the amount of calling to your dog. Slowly increase the distance you walk up to 100 metres. Like any training exercise, if your dog has problems, make the next track shorter and easier so that you can finish on a good note.