

Corners, Articles, Time, Decoys

There are four variables that you can now use to make your tracks more challenging.

Articles

Apart from Track 1, all other tracks require that a dog indicate the articles it finds. This means that you want your dog to come to a halt at the article, and make a positive indication of finding it by either sitting, standing or dropping at the article – and not moving off until you've told it to.

Start training this now. Firstly – what position would you like your dog to assume when it finds an article? Sits and downs are the most stable positions, while a stand can allow a dog to wander onwards. Practice calling out the command sit – down – stand (as appropriate) while walking with your dog, getting the desired response, and praising and rewarding the dog before allowing it to move on. When your dog can do this, we'll move it to tracking.

When you're laying a track, drop a second dirty sock on your tracks at least 10 metres from your start. If your dog works for food, put a small piece of that food on the article, or a small toy if your dog works for toys. Make sure that you know exactly where you have dropped the sock – perhaps 5 steps after a particular bush, or level with a telegraph pole. When your dog pauses to eat the food / play with the toy, call out your command and move briskly up the tracking lead towards the dog, holding the lead to prevent it moving on. Praise the dog, collect the article (and toy if used), and ask your dog to track again.

Discourage your dog from retrieving the article it finds – this will firstly fill her snout with scent and make tracking briefly more difficult. Secondly she will have turned away from the track to return to you and must re-find it. If you're not precisely on the track then she has an extra turn to get back onto the track.

Corners

You will have noticed that all competition tracks have corners. You must know where you are on the track before you can teach corners. You will now need 2 sightlines and a marker (bush, fence post, gate at least 10m off the track) to lay your track. Head out towards your first sightline, going for at least 50 metres to let the dog settle on the track. At your marker make a small change of direction of no more than 15 degrees, now heading towards your new sightline. About 10m after the corner, place an article – this can often assist the dog around the corner. Walk another 30m or so and place your end marker and food/toy, then another 10 metres before heading back to your dog, making sure to be well clear of your track on the way back.

Start your dog tracking, and watch very carefully when she gets to your corner. Some dogs will continue tracking on the new line without noticing your change of direction. Others will continue on a straight line and lose the track, which she may indicate by raising her head or searching more vigorously.

Don't allow her to continue forward, rather encourage her to search for the track at the corner. When she finds it and continues on, praise her verbally.

When she is taking these turns confidently, you can increase the angle by 15 degrees, ensuring that she can still handle this. Move gradually to 90% - but don't change your angle until the dog has successfully turned at least 5 times, and then change it by 10 – 15 degrees. Your aim is to eventually move to right angles, but you should be slow and cautious in getting there, only changing the angle when your dog is comfortably turning.

In the higher level tracks there are acute corners – don't attempt to teach these until your dog has a Tracking Dog title. Teach them the same way – increasing the angle a few degrees at a time.

Time

Adding waiting time to the track can be done gradually, 5 minutes at a time. Don't age your tracks more than the half hour needed for the Test 3 until you have your TD title.

Decoys

A decoy is someone else crossing your track. In competition it only occurs in tracks 5 onwards. Many dogs have no problems with decoys and ignore them, others are decoyed away. Try one decoy, crossing the track once at right angles at least thirty minutes after it has been laid. As with corners, place an article about 10 – 15 metres after the decoy. Also, as with corners, you must know EXACTLY where the decoy crossed. When you and your dog reach the decoy track, allow her to investigate a few metres either way, but do not allow the dog to turn onto the decoy, encouraging her to work the main track. If your dog becomes confused with the scent, you may re-scent her with the start sock. Encourage her when she returns to the main track.

Multiple variables

You've now been given 3 variables – articles, corners and time – and a complicating factor in decoys. Vary one at a time so that you can pinpoint any problems. Like training everything, if you strike problems, back up and make it easier for the dog to build those skills.

Next article –the Tracking Dog Excellent title.