

Training for the TSDX

The TSDX tracks introduce a range of new complications designed to test both dog and handler. Let's look at each of them and discuss possible training techniques.

Firstly – meandering tracks. These are more of a problem for the handler than the dog. Dogs don't need straight lines and set numbers of corners of defined angles ... however these are immensely reassuring to handlers. Dogs tend to follow the scent trail, and need assistance from their handlers only when they are uncertain or discouraged. The meandering track tends to challenge your assumptions and force you to trust their dog. So get used to reading your dog's tracking behaviour – if she's on track, follow her. If she's not, encourage her to search.

The track should follow a dirt road or trail for part of the distance – so start adding the crossing of such a road or trail at 90 degrees to your tracks. Use articles after the crossing to encourage your dog across the trail, and bring them gradually back to the trail itself. As the dog progresses, gradually change the angle at which you cross the trail, altering it a few degrees at a time so that you cross at a more oblique angle, spending a bit more time on the trail as the dog becomes more comfortable with the surface change. Work towards your dog being able to track a meander down the trail without problems.

A starting point that has been contaminated should not cause either you or your dog too many problems by the time you reach TSDX tracks. Remember you still get a scented article to cue your dog to the track you want. Be sure to give your dog a good sniff of the scented article before asking your dog to search for the track – and then tuck the article into your tracking bag in case you need it later. As there are still two flags to mark the start, you could cast your dog in front of the flags as done in the Tracking Champion track – but remember that as soon as you cross the line between the flags judging will commence.

A TSDX4 should also cross at least one paved or gravel road, stream or shallow body of water. If you work towards your dog being able to follow a scent down a dirt trail, crossing a paved or gravel road should not be a significant issue. Use the same technique as listed above for crossing trails – an article on the far side, and encourage your dog to cross. Streams or shallow bodies of water can be more problematic – encourage your dog across the stream on the same line as it was tracking, then encourage it to search for the track on the far bank. Some of the tracklayer's scent will remain on the surface of the water. Be sure to move right and left along the bank to find the scent, in case you went off course while crossing the stream.

Urban tracks introduce a new range of obstacles. There are a variety of hard surfaces, including cement, asphalt and paving. Introduce these surfaces separately, and initially track onto them from grass to give your dog a firm scent. Some shreds of vegetation will adhere to the shoes of the tracklayer and ease the transition of surfaces.

Buildings are a significant challenge in urban tracks. Sometimes scent will move away from buildings, especially if air-conditioning units are in the building. Other times scents will adhere closely to the building. Breezes, time of day, humidity, building materials and a variety of other factors can influence this. Start your dog working past a building at some distance, and gradually reduce the distance over time. Give your dog time to work out the scent problem – be patient and encouraging. Make notes of your practices, including time of day, weather conditions, building materials and

surrounds as well as dog response, so that you can draw conclusions about your dog's methods of handling different conditions.

Urban tracks also have a range of distractions – children, traffic, birds, cats and areas where dogs have scent-marked. Expect distraction, and encourage your dog to work through it. Traffic can also blow the scent a long way – including across the road, so don't demand footstep tracking in an urban environment.

Urban tracks also introduce danger to you and your dog. A safety steward will work closely to you, and may tell you to stop at times, depending upon safety issues. Your dog by now should be able to stop tracking when requested, and resume on command, so continue that process.

Night tracks are a totally new experience for you and your dog. Many dogs will be incredulous the first time you ask them to track at night – like anything else, start small and easy and with lots of encouragement, and know where the first track or two go. Don't forget safety – yours and your dog's – use reflective clothing, lights, and have a friend acting as safety steward.

TSDX is an extension of the fine tracking work you and your dog are already doing. Introduce the new elements slowly and carefully – and remember if you have problems to go back to easier tracks while your dog builds skills and gains confidence.