



## Tracking –

### **A Beginner's Guide to the World of Tracking**

An AKC – American Kennel Club Publication

#### ***For More Information:***

American Kennel Club  
5580 Centerview Drive  
Raleigh, NC 27606-3390  
919-233-9767

**[www.akc.org](http://www.akc.org)**

With a keen sense of smell – 100,000 times stronger than humans – dogs are often used to find lost people and animals, drugs, avalanche and disaster victims, and even to detect cancer. AKC

Tracking is a canine sport that demonstrates a dog's natural ability to recognize and follow a scent and is the foundation of canine search and rescue work. Unlike obedience and agility trials, where dogs respond to the owner's commands, in tracking a dog is completely in charge, for only he knows how to use his nose to find and follow the track.

For many, the greatest pleasure of tracking is the hours spent outside training and interacting with their dogs. The tracking community is known for its camaraderie, and they all share in the excitement of a "pass" and the disappointment of a "fail."

#### **How Do I Get Started in Tracking?**

Getting started in tracking is easy, and you won't find a more willing participant! A puppy instinctively uses his nose – training your dog to track simply hones his natural ability. And since all dogs have a natural ability to follow a scent, any breed is capable of learning to track.

Tracking requires very little equipment. You just need a harness, a 20-to-40 foot lead, a few flags to mark your track and an open grassy area free of obstacles such as roads, ditches or woods.

There are some great reference books that provide step-by-step instruction to help you train your dog for tracking. Many of the people who have followed these educational programs have gone on to earn tracking titles.

Before you enter a Tracking Dog Test (TD), you must have the dog certified by an AKC-approved or provisional judge. This certification form must accompany the entry form.

Once you and your dog are ready, find a tracking event in your area by going to the AKC Events Calendar on the AKC website. Contact the club to get a premium list, which details all relevant event information, including the entry form. Complete the form and send it to the test secretary.

Once the entries have closed, a draw will determine who will be in the test. There is a great demand for tracking tests, and the number of dogs that can be judged in one day is limited. As a result, there are more entries than spaces available.

#### **Am I Eligible?**

To be eligible to exhibit a dog in tracking tests, a dog must be:

Registered with the AKC, enrolled in the AKC Indefinite Listing Privilege (ILP) program, or be a Foundation Stock Service (FSS) recorded breed that meets the eligibility requirements for competition 6 months of age or older

#### **Indefinite Listing Privilege (ILP)**

Dogs of any breed recognized by the AKC that do not have registration papers or known parents may qualify for an ILP. These dogs may participate in certain AKC events, such as obedience, agility, rally, tracking and many types of performance events. Photos are required to prove the dog is an AKC registered breed. The dog must also be spayed or neutered.

#### **Tracking Titles**

A dog can earn three AKC Tracking titles, each has an increased degree of difficulty. The TD (Tracking Dog) title must be earned before competing for a TDX (Tracking Dog Excellent) or VST (Variable Surface Tracker) title. A Champion Tracker (CT) is awarded only to those dogs that have earned all three tracking titles – TD, TDX and VST. If a dog is awarded the CT title, he is among the elite of those dogs active in tracking. To earn a tracking title, a dog needs to pass the test in which he is exhibiting only once.

#### **Tracking Dog (TD)**

The TD track is from 440-to-500 yards long with 3-to-5 turns (or change in direction) and aged from a half-hour to two hours. A dog must indicate a glove or wallet placed at the end of the track. Tracks are plotted in an open field with uniform cover. There are no obstacles such as roads, ditches or woods. The start of the track will be marked with a flag. A second flag is placed 30 yards from the start flag to indicate the direction of the first leg of the track. There are no other flags in the field.

## **Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX)**

The TDX track is 800-to-1000 yards long, with 5-to-7 turns and aged from 3-to-5 hours. The track also has two sets of cross (diversionary) tracks and has some of the aforementioned obstacles. The start is marked with a single flag and the dog must determine the direction of the first leg. There are four dissimilar articles for each track, one at the start and three more on the track.

## **Variable Surface Tracking (VST)**

A VST track is from 600-to-800 yards long, with 4-to-8 turns, and aged from 3-to-5 hours. The articles must be one each of leather, cloth, plastic and metal. The VST track must also contain three different surfaces with one turn on a non-vegetated surface such as concrete. This test demonstrates the utility of the tracking dog to work in an urban environment.

## **The Role of the Judge**

Judges are solely in charge of the tracking field and their decisions are final in all matters affecting the evaluation and the working of the dogs and their owners. Judges design the track, instruct tracklayers how to walk the track, prepare charts that accurately depict the track's design, and approve the articles used. The judges also determine the start time for each dog and evaluate the dog's performance.

## **Role of the Tracklayers**

Next to the judges, the tracklayers are the most important members of the test. They must:

- Follow the directions of the judges
- Be sure they place the articles where indicated
- Know the exact location of the track in the event the dog fails so they can help the owner and dog complete the track

## **How a Tracking Test Works**

For the host club and the two judges, a tracking test is a two-day commitment, regardless of weather. Tracking tests are usually held on Sunday, but the judges and tracklayers spend most of Saturday plotting a track for each dog. The judges draw charts of each track indicating landmarks that will allow them to locate the track with flags that mark the turns. The flags will be removed when the tracklayers walk the track the morning of the test.

On the morning of the test, the exhibitors gather for another "draw" which determines the order dogs are to exhibit. After the tracks have aged the required time, the exhibitor puts the harness on the dog, attaches a 20-to-40-foot lead and begins the track. The dog is not allowed off lead at any time!

The dog must closely follow the path the tracklayer has walked and find the article(s) dropped along the track. The judges follow the dog and handler to determine if the dog is on or off the track. If the dog is off the track and the judges determine the dog cannot return, one judge will blow the whistle signaling the dog has failed. There is no time limit as long as the dog is working. If the dog follows the track finding the article(s) placed on the track, he earns the tracking title for the level at which he is exhibiting.

## **Tips for the First-Time Exhibitor**

- Make sure your dog is registered with the AKC.
- Be sure your dog is current on all inoculations.
- Become familiar with the AKC Tracking Regulations.
- Attend a tracking test in your area to become familiar with the test procedure.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions of those attending the test and experienced exhibitors. This is how you learn!
- If possible, find a tracking class in your area.
- Bring foul weather gear and dress warmly, tracking tests are held in all types of weather.
- Join and become active in a local club! Tracklayers, committee chairs and workers are always needed.

## **Tips for the First-Time Spectator**

- Dress warmly and bring foul weather gear. Tracking tests are seldom cancelled because of bad weather.
- However tempting, do not pet a dog without asking permission first.
- Do not be afraid to ask questions. This is the way you learn.
- If you own a dog, leave him at home. Unentered dogs should not be present during the tracking test.
- If the club provides a gallery of charts, observe the indications of the dog when it is on and off the track.