



Blind Tracks

By Rosemary Janoch

Anyone who has viewed the Wizard of Oz knows well the line Dorothy makes during her journey. It goes something like “Lions and tigers and bears...oh my!” I think that a lot of beginning trackers have a similar belief but it sounds more like “Heat and wind and blind tracks...oh my!” There isn’t much any of us can do about the heat or the wind except to simply not track on days that are too hot or too windy, but we *can* control if, when, and how often we use blind tracks.

If you are new to the sport of tracking and do not know what a blind track is, it is simply an unmarked track. The handler does not know the length of the legs or the number, location, or direction of the turns. The handler has no idea where the track goes and must rely completely on the dog. A certification track and a track at an actual test would be examples of blind tracks.

In general, marked tracks are used to train the dog and unmarked tracks are used to train the handler. A handler that is new to the sport, therefore, needs more blind tracks than an experienced handler. Since the main purpose for running a blind track is to learn how to read a dog’s body language, a novice tracker needs many more experiences with this than does a seasoned tracker. For the purpose of this article, let’s assume the dog is progressing in his training at a normal rate and we are focusing on training the handler.

Experienced handlers have watched numerous dogs track over a span of many years. They have become experts at both reading the nuances of canine body language and at recognizing the various scenting conditions present on a given day. In fact, they are not only well versed in watching their own dogs track but have also spent many hours in the field watching a variety of other dogs, both good and bad, track. These many experiences create knowledgeable “readers” of both dogs and scent.

Long before an inexperienced tracker considers running a blind track with her dog, she needs to spend time watching other teams track. This would include watching teams work on training days and watching teams at actual tracking tests. I admit to being a bit dismayed when I see an exhibitor at a tracking test draw track #1, run the track and fail, and then pack up the car and leave without watching the other exhibitors. This not only smacks of poor sportsmanship but clearly indicates to me that the exhibitor is clueless about the opportunity she is missing.

We need to take note of what obedience exhibitors do. Have you not seen a crowd gather around the Open B and Utility B rings, especially when a well-known and well-respected handler is about to enter the ring? Everyone knows that a potential High In Trial performance is at hand. Obedience handlers know that there is much that can be learned about smooth handling by watching an expert at work. We all need to convey this same information to novice trackers; much can be learned about smooth intelligent handling by watching a seasoned tracking team. For that matter, much can be learned by watching the lousy teams, too, so either way you shouldn't leave the test early!

Observe tracking teams of various abilities until, even at a distance, you can read the dogs well enough to tell when they have given a turn indication, when they have given an article indication, when they are crittering, and when they have totally lost the track. You are now ready to try a blind track. There are various methods that work well with total beginners, but these are some of the most common approaches.

The first method involves running a blind track with someone else's trained tracking dog. This was the way I was first introduced to tracking and it remains one of my most vivid memories. The dog's owner can lay the track for you, harness the dog, and simply hand you the lead and let you go. A well trained dog is likely to take you through the entire track without incident and it will be over in a matter of minutes. You will be the proverbial "dope on a rope" for your first blind track. You gain a tremendous respect for a dog's ability with an experience like this and move on to your own dog knowing exactly what it feels like to have that type of confidence in a dog.

If you don't have the opportunity to run an already trained dog on a blind track, try this second method which progressively removes the markers from your training tracks. This method will gradually accustom you to running a blind track with your own dog. You must be *very* specific in your directions to the track layer. Instruct the track layer to mark all of the turns except for the last one. This needs to be an experienced track layer you trust. This person must be able to help you on that last turn if all does not go well. The track layer needs to know precisely where the turn is and the exact direction of the next leg. The reason for leaving the last turn unmarked is that you have the first several turns to let your dog settle into the track and gain your confidence before you expect him to take you through a blind turn.

If that goes well, at the next tracking session have the track layer leave the last two turns unmarked. If you are still reading your dog well and you are successfully completing the track without help, you are ready to have only the first turn marked leaving the rest of the track blind. These tracks all need to be fully aged tracks so that you are actually testing you and your dog's ability to work as a team. Don't run the tracks in fields where you can see a visible trail left by the track layer. If the track is not truly *blind* then you are missing the point of the exercise.

All of you must be very clear in your directions to your track layers that you do not want to hear from them at all if you are getting through the track on your own. They are not to tell you that you just took the turn correctly or that your dog is precisely on the next leg. You must feel like you are out there alone with your dog. Concentrate on your dog's body language and let him tell you whether he is on the track. Don't expect someone else to tell you. He's the expert so listen to him!

What if all does *not* go well on one of these blind tracks? I usually tell my track layers to say nothing at all unless I ask for help or unless the dog is taking me in the wrong direction (the track went left and my dog is pulling me right, or the track goes straight and my dog is making a turn). In such instances, the track layers are simply instructed to say "No" and I will stop dead in my

tracks. They are not to tell me that the track turned left at the tall brown weed and went toward the fallen log. It is up to me to work out the problem with my dog. They are also *not* to tell me if my dog cut the last corner by six feet, or if he is several yards to the left of the track, or if he is sniffing a cross track. I am out there to see if I can read my dog. I am not out there to see if I can follow directions given to me by my track layer.

Many times I am not in a position to use either of the methods described above because I am tracking by myself. I introduce the concept of “blind” into my training tracks by using a ground marker at a single turn which is not visible from a distance. I practically have to be standing over it to see the turn marker, such as a tiny yellow flower in the field. When I am watching my young dog track and I suddenly see his head come up and I recognize his “turn” behavior I like to look down at the ground and see my little yellow flower. Yippee...it is time to call a tracking judge and get that youngster certified!

If you need to lay blind tracks for yourself, you can also try laying them at dusk when it is difficult to see your markers until you are only a few feet away. You are naturally going to have a general idea of where the track goes and in what directions the turns head, but you will be pleasantly surprised at how close to a blind track you can run even though you laid it yourself. Just don't make a map and be sure to use field markers that you can't see until you are right on top of them.

On any of these tracks, be sure to carry a spare glove in case you need to abort the track. Toss the glove to the ground and praise your dog for indicating it. Now decide what went wrong with the track. Was the error your fault?

One of the more common errors that beginners make on blind tracks is to expect the dog to pull you off your feet to indicate a turn. On the marked tracks, you knew where the turns were and very likely praised the dog the moment he stepped out in the new direction. When the track is blind, you don't know if the dog is actually on the next leg or not and so you tend to withhold praise and wait for the dog to really *convince* you that the track goes that way. You are changing the way you handle your dog and any time you change the way you handle your dog, you are asking for trouble. Handle your dog in a test situation in the same manner as in a training session. So if you want him to pull you off your feet at a test, then you must ask for that same pull in training.

Another error seen on blind tracks is a lack of patience on the handler's part. Sometimes it is simply a bad case of nerves that causes us to lose our patience so be sure to keep your nerves under control while tracking. What seems like twenty minutes to you was probably only four minutes. Give the dog time to work out a turn or a scenting problem without badgering him to make a decision. Remain facing the original direction you were moving and *wait*. More than one dog has failed a track because a handler started encouraging the dog to move before the dog was ready. If the dog perceives that you want him to move *now*, he will...even if it is in a completely random direction since you have not given him enough time to locate the track. The only movement you should be doing when the dog is searching for the track is to slowly turn and face a direction the dog has not checked, and I would advise you to do this only if the dog is truly struggling and has not looked in that particular area.

Controlling your dog's speed will also help you on blind tracks. It is difficult to read a fast moving dog and they tend to overshoot turns. Resolve this issue early on before you attempt blind tracks. Do not try to change his speed in the middle of a blind track.

If you are having trouble reading your dog, he may be giving subtle signals that you are not picking up on. Have someone videotape your dog tracking and study the tape at home or show it

to a more experienced handler that may be able to show you your dog's tail drop or head tilt signaling a loss of track. You may also have to track a trained dog on a blind track as I mentioned at the beginning of this article until you can read a trained dog. Then go back and see if your ability to read your own dog has improved.

Although I have mentioned that beginners need more blind tracks than seasoned exhibitors, keep in mind that each time we advance to a new level of competition we become a "beginner". So even though you have put TD titles on five dogs, if this is your first attempt at a TDX title, you better get someone to lay a blind TDX track for you. Can you read your dog under these new conditions with age, cross tracks, and obstacles all involved? Even if you have ten TDX dogs, if you are now venturing into the realm of VST for the first time you must consider yourself a beginner all over again. You very likely don't know how to read your dog as he tracks through the swirling air currents between buildings and tries to make his first hard surface turn in the middle of a parking lot. You need a blind track.

I must caution you, however, on running too many blind tracks. Dogs are trained on marked tracks so most of your tracks should be marked. I would suggest marking at least 9 out of 10 tracks. Blind tracks should only be used occasionally to keep you honest in your handling, to sharpen your observational skills, and to improve your ability to read your dog.