



Handler Errors

By Rosemary Janoch

I would like to devote this column to discussing handler errors seen at tracking tests. If you compete in various venues of dog competition, you are probably very familiar with the topic of handler errors. How many of us have lost points in the obedience ring because our lousy footwork on a turn caused the dog to bump us or go wide? How many of us have blown a qualifying run in agility with a poorly timed command? It may surprise you to learn that even in the sport of tracking, which many people believe is solely controlled by the dog, handler errors can make the difference between a passing and failing performance.

Some handler errors occur even before the dog leaves the start flag. One such error is not allotting enough time to accomplish what needs to be done before the test begins. A dog that needs to potty is not devoting one hundred percent of his concentration to the track. The number of handlers who do not leave sufficient time to exercise their dogs thoroughly is amazing. Although it is not a failure for a dog to relieve itself on a track, dogs sometime become so distracted with their problem that even after they relieve themselves, they cannot refocus on the track.

A lack of time also causes some handlers to grab the dog, the harness, and the 40' lead out of the car and rush to the start flag. It is only when the dog begins tracking that the handler realizes the lead has a huge tangle in it. Instead of having the entire 40' of lead to work with, the handler

is forced to work the dog with significantly less lead than is permitted. This is certainly not the dog's fault. This is purely a handler error.

One must remain calm at the start flag. Panic on your part will slide right down the lead to the dog. Remain calm enough to untangle the tracking lead at the start flag and lay it out behind you. Calmly put the harness on the dog. Some handlers become so rattled that they forget how to put the harness on the dog. I have even seen a handler put the dog's head and one of the front legs into the same hole. Now there are certainly dogs that will gamely track even though one of their legs is sticking out of the neck hole and their armpit is being constantly pinched. For many other dogs, however, the distraction will be overwhelming and will result in the dog failing to track.

Another error that occurs at the start flag is failing to let the lead out a full twenty feet before starting to walk behind the dog. Handlers leave the first start flag when the dog is only eight or ten feet ahead of them. I'm sure this is just a simple case of nerves, and not a deliberate attempt to violate AKC rules. Once again, however, if handlers would remain calm and focused at the start flag, these kinds of errors would not occur. While on the topic of leads, keep in mind that it is the handler's responsibility to hold the lead high in the air so the dog's legs do not become tangled in the lead when the dog casts. This is a distraction for the dog that can be avoided by an alert handler.

Once you and your dog have left the start flag, handler errors can continue to cause problems. Remember that pointing to the ground and giving your tracking command is permitted only at the first of the two flags. You may repeat your tracking command as many times as you need to as you and your dog progress along the track, but you are no longer permitted to point to the track. This is considered guiding. Guiding is any attempt on your part to tell the dog where the track is located. Guiding at a tracking test will cause the dog to be failed. Some handlers use the commands "Come find!" and "Go find!" while on the track. If this is an attempt to influence the direction of the dog and to tell the dog where the track is, then it is also considered guiding. Expect to be failed for guiding if the judges believe you are influencing the direction of the dog.

Also considered as guiding is turning in the direction of a new leg of the track before the dog has committed to that new direction. This would be possible whenever the track is visible because of snow, early morning dew, or flattened vegetation.

Restraining a dog that is *actively pulling* in the wrong direction is also considered guiding. This does not mean that you may not restrain a dog that is casting for the track at a turn. It does mean that you must follow a dog that is determinedly pulling you even if it is in the wrong direction. You may not dig in your heels and prevent the dog from moving.

If the dog pulls you in a wrong direction for a number of yards and then loses the track scent, you may back up to help the dog relocate the track. What you may *not* do is turn around and march back to where you believe the track is. Leading the dog in this way is also guiding and you would be failed.

One of the biggest handler errors is trying to second guess either the dog or the judges. Sometimes a dog leaves a track that is visible to you and heads off in a new direction. Don't second guess the dog. Trust the dog's ability. The visible track may be a deer path that the judges walked on for several yards and then left. The dog is doing the correct thing by leaving the path. Sometimes a handler is so enthralled with a visible path that he/she won't let the dog leave it.

Handlers have also been known to second guess the judges. They have a preconceived notion of where the track goes, or in which direction a turn must be made. My advice would be to let the dog do the tracking. He's the one wearing the harness.

Lack of patience on the handler's part can cause a dog to make a decision about the track direction prematurely. The dog might not be really sure which direction to take, but, because the handler is impatiently encouraging the dog to move on, he chooses a direction and pulls even if it is the wrong direction.

Impatience, and a bad case of nerves, can also cause a handler to miss subtle article or turn indications. These are indications that would have been recognized on a training day, but the stress of a tracking test causes the handler to miss them.

Nerves at a tracking test can also cause many handlers to babble at their dog the entire time the dog is working. Most handlers consider this a bad habit which needs to be worked on long before the day of the test. Do not let your nerves at the tracking test bring this bad habit back into play.

A bad case of nerves can also cause a handler to become disoriented on the tracking field. The handler is unable to remember which part of the field has already been tracked on, how many turns have already been made, and where was the last place the handler was absolutely certain the dog was on the track. That last piece of information is particularly important if the dog loses the track scent and the handler needs to back up to help the dog relocate the track.

All of these handler errors can be avoided with practice. Remember that being calm, assured, and focused is every bit as important for the handler at a tracking test as it is for the dog.