



Improving the Start By Rosemary Janoch

No matter what level of training your dog currently has, developing and maintaining a good work ethic at the start of a track should be an ongoing goal. If your dog putters at the start flag eating grass and acting disinterested, you have a poor start. If your dog meanders down the first leg with a lack of motivation but settles in nicely after making the first turn, you have a poor start. If your TD dog runs from the first flag to the second flag but then stops and wonders where the track is, you have a poor start. There are exercises that can be taught and handling techniques that can be used to improve your dog's start.

Let's begin with the TD dog that runs from the first flag to the second flag without really tracking, but rather just uses his eyes to get to the second flag. Unfortunately, if you permit your dog to start a track in this manner, you have just wasted the only 40 yards of terrain that you were absolutely positive of where the track was. Remember that the track layer must line up in a straight line 10 yards before the first flag and then must walk between the two start flags which are 30 yards apart. That gives you a solid 40 yards of known track to settle your dog in, praise him for tracking the correct scent, and establish teamwork before you pass the second flag and find yourself in an open field. A tracker who allows the dog to run to the second flag without tracking is every bit as ineffective a handler as the individual who is impatient at the start and basically "pushes" the dog along between the two flags even though the dog is floundering. A handler that keeps moving along using up the space in between the flags accomplishes very little except that they have managed to do 30 yards of the track. Who is going to do the rest of the track if you haven't allowed the dog to work the first 30 yards?

So what *should* you be doing with your TD dog? First, I would suggest you establish a

calming routine when starting a track. You want to avoid the frantic searching behavior exhibited by some dogs that leaves them physically and mentally exhausted before they even begin the track. So the idea is to remain calm at the start. Do not be in a hurry to begin. If you are not in a panic your dog will not be in a panic either.

As you approach the start of the track, line up yourself and your dog in a straight line with the two start flags and stop about 10 yards from the first flag. Here is the beginning of the 40 yards of known track. Put the harness on your dog, calmly play out the tracking line behind you to be certain it is not tangled, and confidently give your tracking command to “go find.” Allow the dog to move forward with about 6-8 feet of tracking lead. Do not give him the entire 40 feet and permit him to wildly circle the area looking for the track. It is directly in front of him. If you took several moments putting on his harness and playing out the line behind you, your dog has already found the track and knows it is directly in front of him. This is why you only give him 6-8 feet of lead. You want to see him move smartly forward with no horsing around before you let more lead slip through your fingers. If you consistently stick to a routine of this sort, your dog will give you the same beautiful start at a test that you ask of him in practice. The key is to be sure that your start routine at a test is as identical as possible to the start routine you use at a training session.

Patience is needed. Don't mindlessly chatter at your dog. Wait for your dog to tighten the lead, lean into the harness, and commit to the track before you leave the first start flag. You are trying to develop the *habit* of starting well. Dogs are creatures of habit and with enough repetitions you will soon find that your dog will not know any other way of starting.

If you have one of those dogs that likes to run to the second flag without tracking you might find that a food drop between the two start flags gets his nose down. Be sure the drop is significantly enticing or it will mean nothing to him. When the nose is down at the start flag, move the food drop farther and farther from the start until it is beyond the second flag and then eliminate it all together (the sooner the better).

At this point you might be thinking that since you and your dog are going to be pursuing the TDX title somewhere down the road, you want your young TD dog to learn to find the direction of the track for himself without you bringing him straight up to the first leg. I believe in doing this, but *only* after my TD dog has a no-nonsense, 100% reliable, totally committed start when he is brought directly in to the flags and, needless to say, test day is not the time or the place to be adventurous and bring your dog into the track at an angle. Make sure that you always bring your dog straight in to the track at a test.

If your dog tracks half-heartedly until after the first turn, see if a “starter” track helps. A starter track is a short (50-60 yards) straight track. It provides the dog with a quick reward for tracking as the glove is found just beyond the two start flags. Typically, starter tracks are most effective with youngsters who need a reminder about what their job is, but I have seen them used with more experienced dogs that lose focus.

Starter tracks are also useful if you travel. If you enter an out of town tracking test with your dog, I suggest you locate a field near your hotel and put in a starter track for your dog to acclimate him to the local field smells. Be sure you are no where near the tracking site, however, as this would be considered training on the grounds.

If you have established a routine at the start, brought him in straight, and shown patience at the start flag without pushing your dog to the second flag, and yet you still don't like your starts, you might be tempted to “help” your dog by shuffling your feet at the start or scuffing the ground when you lay the track. This actually overloads the dog's nose and makes it harder

for him. If you feel you need to do something, simply pause at the first flag for a count of ten before walking forward and then use a shorter stride than you usually do when you walk. After the first 50 yards or so, you should start using your usual stride.

Avoid using too many fresh tracks that are only 10-15 minutes old as the overabundance of scent may be making it difficult for your dog to start. Be sure to do 30-45 minute old tracks although it is not wise to do too many of them either. Dogs learn how to track more effectively when faced with a variety of track strengths, so keep varying the track age.

Avoid using any start methods that involve corrections (verbal or physical) or confrontations like a forced down on a dog that is unwilling to give you one. Corrections and confrontations do nothing to improve the dog's mind set at the start of a track. Provide an incentive to start the track instead. Highly motivated dogs generally have wonderful starts. Use positive reinforcements like prized toys and treats to get the dog focused on the task at hand instead of negatives. If the dog's early experiences with tracking have been highly motivational and if he has repeatedly experienced success on his tracks, poor starts are unlikely to creep into future training sessions.

If your dog is working at a more advanced level of tracking (TDX or VST) and he has developed a start problem, closely examine your training schedule. This is particularly true if your dog approaches the start flag with a "couldn't care less" attitude. You might be guilty of overtraining your dog. Perhaps he has been asked to do too many tracks that were too long, too old, and too complex. His reluctance to start could be telling you he needs a break. If he isn't having fun anymore you need to lighten up.

When training your advanced dog to do a one flag start, document your angles of approach to the track. Methodically cover all the angles to the start article. Keep track of how you approach the flag so that you bring him in from both the left side and the right side equally often. If you notice that he struggles with one side more than the other (for example, he always takes a long time to find the track when it heads off at a 45 degree angle to the left) then be sure to work that approach in more frequently than the approaches with which he has no difficulty. Keep in mind that at a test you should always ask the judges from what direction they would like you to approach the start flag...and then specifically follow their directions! I have seen exhibitors make huge arcs approaching the flag so that the actual track is practically *behind* the handler. The dog has to really work hard to find the direction of the track and then needs to convince the handler to turn around and track backwards. Going directly to the flag from where the judges send you in eliminates this problem.

The age of the track sometimes causes an advanced tracking dog to start poorly. If you find your dog starts well on a 1 or 2 hour old track but struggles on a 3 hour old start, try laying a sequence of three simple tracks that vary in age and are run in the reverse order from when they were laid. For example, you could walk the first starter track at 7 am, lay the second track at 8 am, and the final track at 9 am. At ten o'clock you run the dog on the third track you laid which is only one hour old. Remove his harness at the end of the track and praise him for a job well done. Now take him to the second track that you put in which is now 2 hours old. Put on his harness and run that track. Remove the harness and praise him for another job well done. Walk him over to the first track you laid at 7 am which is now 3 hours old and run him on it. I have had individuals with youngsters who have never run a three hour old track that have successfully run all three tracks. Dogs seem to clearly understand the concept of track age when they are presented with three tracks of varying ages, one after another. This can be modified to only put 30 minutes between the ages so that the tracks were 2 hours, 2.5 hours,

and 3 hours of age (or for youngsters that run a 30 minute, 1 hour, and 1.5 hour track). The secret is to make this a practice in *starts* only. That is the reason you keep taking the harness off and putting it back on. Common sense would tell you that if you are having a start problem, you don't need to work on a full length track...concentrate on the problem at hand and keep the tracks short.

Having a start problem creep into your training program is like having a front or finish problem with your obedience dog or a retrieve problem with your field dog. Our dogs aren't spending their evenings devising ways to be naughty. They simply don't know what is wanted of them. That brings me to one of my favorite quotes from the book "Tracking Dogs: Theory and Methods" by Glen Johnson who says:

- (1) If the dog is not giving the track his full attention when in training then I am not providing the necessary motivation to keep him interested in the track- it is my fault.*
- (2) If the dog is not learning the objective I have set for him to learn- I have designed the learning situation incorrectly for him to learn that objective- it is my fault.*
- (3) If the dog cannot handle an unexpected situation- I have not prepared him for that situation- it is my fault.*

Happy tracking and good starts to you all!