



Motivation

By Rosemary Janoch

Is your tracking dog unmotivated? An unmotivated tracker is easy to spot. The dog shows little or no commitment to the track. The start is slow and unexciting. The dog uses delaying tactics like peeing, chasing butterflies, crittering, and, in general, is actively searching for a distraction so that the track can be ignored. The dog may begin to graze. Eating grass is more fun than tracking. Deer, goose, and rabbit droppings suddenly become a high priority. The dog exhibits little or no tracking behavior. Perhaps the dog stands and stares intently into the distance, or repeatedly returns to the handler. This last behavior, however, might also be a sign of stress or confusion. Be certain that your dog is not stressed or confused before you accuse him of being unmotivated.

Dogs lose their motivation to track for a variety of reasons. An overzealous handler might be making the tracks too long or too old, or might be tracking the dog too frequently. The dog might be offered too little encouragement to track, or be offered little or no reward for tracking. The handler's attitude might also be influencing the dog. The handler needs to project the idea that this is a fun game, not work.

The dog may be unmotivated because he is bored. Handlers need to be careful to not do the same things over and over. Don't make the tracks the same length or the same age every time. Change the field you track in from time to time. Don't always use the same field just because it is the closest one to home.

Dogs can also appear to be unmotivated when, in fact, they are simply not feeling well. A dog in pain is not going to pull into the harness with the same intensity as when the dog is feeling well. A dog on medication for an ear infection or on antibiotics for a

bladder problem may not be able to smell the track at all. Do not mistake this for a lack of motivation. Be sure to rule out physical problems first before accusing the dog of being unmotivated.

Along these same lines, be careful about the number of physical corrections the dog has received recently. A dog that has been repeatedly corrected for pulling the owner in an obedience class may be reluctant to pull the owner in a tracking field. A dog that has been reprimanded for taking crosstracks may now be hesitant to take turns.

A handler that enforces too much control over a dog may create an overly cautious dog. This may be perceived as a lack of motivation on the dog's part. You may need to have an impartial third party observe you and your dog tracking to determine whether you actually have a motivation problem or not.

Having decided that your dog is unmotivated, there are a variety of ways to rekindle a dog's interest in tracking. Food, of course, is a big motivator. Food can be placed along the track, or can be placed as a reward at the end of the track. The secret is to find a food treat that is really motivating to your dog. Changing the type of food on a random schedule will keep your dog interested in the treats. After a session or two with hot dogs, switch to cheese, then to leftover garlic bread from last night's Italian dinner, etc. Keep it unpredictable.

Skipping your dog's evening meal assures that the dog will be particularly hungry the following morning. If you are aging the track for several hours, however, you might want to put the food into small containers or into zip lock bags. As the dog finds each container, open it up and let the dog eat the food. Keeping the food in containers will keep it from being covered with ants by the time your dog finds it.

If your dog is a toy fanatic, use a favorite toy to motivate your dog to track. Tennis balls, Frisbees, training dummies, squeaky toys, and stuffed animals are all motivational for a typical dog. The ultimate toy for most dogs, however, is a small child. If you happen to have one lying around the house who is old enough to lay a short track for you and sit in the grass and wait for you, use this to your advantage. There are very few dogs that will not enthusiastically track a youngster. When the dog arrives at the end of the track, allow the reunion between dog and child to be an especially happy one filled with giggles and play. Tracking a loved one may be just what your dog needs to revive its interest in tracking. If a child is not available, any person the dog is particularly fond of will do.

Both toys and treats can also be effectively used to motivate a dog past crosstracks during TDX training. Initially, you would place the toy or treat just a few paces past the crosstracks. While the dog is on the crosstrack, he will be able to smell the toy or treat just a few steps ahead of his current position. This will cause the majority of dogs to willingly leave the crosstrack behind and to continue forward along the main track. Gradually move the motivator to 10 yards beyond the crosstrack, then 20 yards, then 30 yards, etc. Vary how far the dog must continue on the main track before he gets the reward. Do not simply continue to extend the distance the dog must track to get his reward. Occasionally put the motivator back at the 10 yard mark so he gets rewarded immediately. In time, the smell of the crosstracks will become a signal to your dog to move quickly down the main track, thereby eliminating many crosstrack problems in the future.

If your dog enjoys toys but is not a fanatic about them, pick the toy that seems to be his favorite and take it away from him. He will now get to play with this toy *only* on the

track and *only* with you. Make that toy the most special toy that ever existed. Go wild in the field whenever your dog finds it. Throw it around the field for him to chase and retrieve. Play tug games with the toy. Have a ball. Then put the toy back into your tracking bag and don't let your dog see it again until the next time the two of you go tracking.

Playing like this in the tracking field will only work if your dog already knows how to play with you. I have seen tracking dogs that will not tug on the glove with their owners, nor will they chase the glove if it is thrown for them, nor will they prance around the field and, in general, act silly. These dogs need to be taught to play with their owners in another setting. Only then will playing in the tracking field be an effective motivator.

If toys, treats, and play motivate your tracking dog, then use them where your dog most needs to be motivated. Some dogs have poor starts and need a motivation to get past the 30 yard flag. Some dogs lack motivation on turns. For those dogs, food, toys, and play should follow a successful turn. Some dogs need help getting beyond crosstracks as was mentioned earlier, so place your motivator shortly after the crosstracks. Whatever problem your particular dog has can very likely be addressed by increasing the dog's motivation to track.

Although food, toys, and play are the three most commonly used motivators, there are other sources of motivation that can be used with your dog. One strategy that has been used by many handlers is jealousy. If you have two dogs that you are currently tracking, leave the unmotivated one behind in the minivan while you make a big fuss over getting out the harness and lead for the other dog. I have a minivan with a hatch that lifts up. I can place two crates side by side with the crate doors facing out the back. It is a perfect set up for this maneuver. I leave the hatch up and the unmotivated tracker gets to watch me walk off into the field with the second dog. If the dog begins to bark and carry on, ignore him. When you return to the van after finishing the track, you may be pleasantly surprised to find that your unmotivated tracker is now dancing around his crate with a "Take me! Take me!" look all over his face.

Although I have never personally tried this strategy, I have heard of a handler who walked a track while accompanied by a bitch in season. Needless to say, his male dog put his nose to the ground and tracked enthusiastically all the way to the glove.

If your tracks have been very predictable with straight legs and ninety degree turns, try making them a little more interesting to motivate your dog. Even a dog that is in training for the TD title would enjoy a track that crosses a bridle path or small road. Almost every dog enjoys tracking through open woods and negotiating an obstacle like a fallen tree, a creek, or a wooden bridge.

Long, straight legs can be made more interesting by placing a serpentine in the middle of the leg. Make the turns more interesting by using both open turns and acute turns on your track. Making your tracks more interesting and exciting for your dog almost guarantees your dog will be more motivated to follow the track.

Make your long tracks shorter and your aged tracks fresher. Move your tracks from the short mowed grass of the local school yard to the fragrant uncut cover of a meadow. Try laying a track in a horse pasture. If your dog has never had that experience before, he is bound to find it intriguing.

Many handlers increase their dog's motivation to track not by changing the track itself, but rather by changing what happens after the tracking session is over. Playtime with the

glove is certainly common, but there are other rewarding behaviors that could be even more motivational for your dog. How about a long walk in the woods afterwards? Or a wonderful swim? Or a Frisbee free for all? If your dog connects tracking with other pleasurable activities like hiking, swimming, and retrieving, the entire day becomes motivational for him. The secret is to find what motivates *your* dog.