



OBSTACLES

By Rosemary Janoch

Although obstacles are a key part of TDX training, they should be introduced to your dog while you are still working at the TD level. Obstacles that are frequently used on TDX tracks include woods, dirt roads, paved roads, streams with or without embankments, gullies, ravines, ditches, fallen trees, bridle paths, fences, steep inclines, steep declines, and changes of cover which might include thick brush, bare ground, cornfields, hedgerows, and just about any other change of vegetation you can imagine.

What causes something to be labeled a tracking obstacle? It needs to present a scenting challenge to the dog, or it needs to present a physical challenge to the dog and/or handler, or it needs to present a handling challenge. Let's look at each one of these scenarios.

Firstly, an obstacle may present a scenting challenge for the dog. An example would be changing cover from knee high grass to the bare dirt of a cornfield. The track scent is certainly not the same in these two radically different types of vegetation. Another example is a track that starts in a field of clover, crosses the rocky berm of a road, crosses the paved surface of the road, over the rocky berm on the far side, and then into a field of alfalfa. The dog is following the same track all along, but is adapting to the changing scenting conditions along the way. The varying scenting conditions make crossing the road an obstacle.

Secondly, an obstacle may present a physical challenge to the dog and/or handler. A deep gully that an athletic dog might be in and out of in the blink of an eye might pose a serious problem for the handler. I once tracked through a group of prickles and thorn bushes that were posing a real problem for me but not my dog. Branches were continuously grabbing at the sleeves of my jacket and catching on my pants. I was having a horrible time trying to move through that vegetation and yet my dog was at a level where there were no thorns at all. He was traveling below the branches, down where the thornless trunks of the bushes were reaching upward. He was able to move at a far quicker pace than I was, and so he was tightly restrained through that entire area while I gingerly picked my way through.

Sometimes the obstacle presents both a scenting problem for the dog and a physical challenge for one or both of you. I remember a ravine that was so steep that I went into it sliding on my backside, and came out of it on all fours. It was an obstacle for the dog as well. He spent a considerable amount of time deciding on his best descent and then again deciding on the best way out. I am thankful that I teach my dogs to pull in their harnesses. His good strong pull on that particular day certainly made it easier for me to get out of the ravine.

Compounding the difficulty of this type of obstacle is the fact that it also presents a scenting challenge for the dog. Track scent tends to pool at the bottom of a gully or ravine much like water does, and a dog can get lost in all that scent. There are times the dog can simply not track his way out of such an obstacle.

Anything on the track that creates a handling challenge would also be considered an obstacle. This is why I like to teach my tracking dogs a "wait" command. The purpose of the command is to insure the safety of both you and your dog. Take a barbed wire fence, for example. If your dog tracks directly up to a barbed wire fence and clearly indicates he wishes to go through it, give your "wait" command and walk up the lead to your dog. What you do next will depend on the strands of the fence, but I generally put one boot on the bottom strand lowering it toward the ground, and then use my gloved hand to raise the second wire upward creating a space large enough for my dog to comfortably pass through by simply stepping over the bottom strand of wire. When the dog is on the other side, I delay a moment or two to see if he finds the track on the other side. If his head goes down and he begins to track, I give him a second "wait" command while I maneuver through the fence. I wait for a commitment on the dog's part because I have had dogs come back to me and find that the track turned right in front of the fence. Waiting for the dog to commit saves you from having to go through the fence twice. It also brings up a handy training tip. Be sure to lay your training tracks with an unpredictable pattern. One time turn before the fence, and the next time go over it.

I would also use the "wait" command to stop the dog from pulling me while I am trying to maneuver down a steep decline, trying to cross a stream, or trying to climb over a split rail fence. Your dog must be taught to stop and wait for you to negotiate the obstacle, and then must restart on command. Since we cannot point to the ground or in any way show the dog where the track is at a test, the restart must be totally under verbal control. I use the command "Go find!" to restart my dog. I teach this to young puppies on their first day of tracking. Since puppies are easily distracted and often need to be refocused on the track, I simply repeat that tracking command from day one when I get them back on the track. The ability to restart a dog on a verbal cue alone certainly comes

in handy with a TDX dog who must be restarted after each drop. It also comes in handy to help the dog refocus on the track after he has clamored over an obstacle. You can teach your young dog to restart by placing multiple drops on their TD tracks, or by laying multiple short tracks to get them used to restarting.

How do you train your dog to do obstacles? There are a variety of training techniques you should keep in mind. Some of them are suitable to use whenever your dog is having a problem with tracking. For instance, go back to fresher tracks when introducing a new obstacle and then gradually add age back on to the track. Start with a small obstacle like a ditch rather than a twenty foot ravine, a bridle path rather than a paved road, a hedgerow rather than one hundred yards in the woods.

Don't leave your dog at the end of your forty foot lead trying to figure out what to do with a new obstacle. Walk up on the lead and encourage him forward. I like to place an article or a food drop shortly after the obstacle to reward the dog for a successful job. Preplanning is certainly necessary to accomplish this, so have a goal in mind that you wish to accomplish with your dog on a training day and then place your articles and/or food appropriately to reinforce the correct behavior.

If a particular obstacle presents a problem for your dog, then retrain on that *same* obstacle until it is no longer a concern for your dog. I once had a dog that was confused about following a track over a fallen tree. In his defense, I will say that it was a very large tree, not one that a dog could easily hop over or that a handler could just step over. The first time he saw that tree, he cast for the track to the left and right searching for a turn. Although I gave him a considerable amount of time to figure it out, the thought that the track might continue on the other side of the tree never occurred to him. I moved up the lead, encouraged him over, and we finished the track. The following day I walked the exact same track. Again I had to show him how to climb over the tree and continue tracking on the other side. I had to help him the third and fourth time we tracked up to that tree, too. In retrospect, I should have put his tracks over a variety of smaller fallen trees in other areas of the woods until he had generalized the concept of looking on the other side of fallen trees, and then I could have run the track over this one hundred year old behemoth. After we successfully mastered the large tree, I did move to other locations and made sure he had generalized the concept to any fallen tree that we came upon.

While I am on the topic of fallen trees, remember that a dog is free to go over the tree, under the tree, or around the tree, as long as he picks up the track on the other side. If there is a large space under a fallen tree that a dog can conveniently pass through, the owner will be faced with a handling challenge. The lead will be going under the tree while the handler will very likely be going over the tree. The "wait" command would come in handy here while the lead is being dealt with.

The idea of generalizing a concept is an important one. If you want to train your dog to track over a bridle path, don't use the same one on every track. Find new paths with different smells to help the dog generalize. Just because your dog can successfully navigate a gully that runs North and South in one field, it does not mean he can handle the gully in the next field that runs East and West.

In pre-VST times, teaching a dog to cross a bridle path, gravel road, or paved road, etc. usually meant teaching the dog to lift his head, cross to the other side, lower his head, and relocate the track. Many dogs just do this naturally on their own. If you even remotely think you might like to try VST tracking with your dog, now is the time to

encourage the dog to scent the entire way across the path or road. Take baby steps when you lay the track across paths and roads to help the dog keep the scent of the track. I do not recommend that you scuff your way across as that leaves a different type of scent trail than your footsteps. So just take baby steps to increase the number of footprints the dog has to smell.

When you train in cornfields, be sure to lay the tracks both parallel and perpendicular to the rows of corn. As the dog becomes more confident with this type of tracking, lay the track diagonally across the field. This is considerably harder for the dog. You may find that your dog will "step" track his way across the field. He will track a few feet down one row of corn, cross over to the next row, track a few feet down that row, cross to the next row, etc. If you could see this from an aerial view, it would look like stair steps. It is generally only after many experiences in a cornfield that a dog can track smoothly on the diagonal.

The idea of tracking parallel to the vegetation, perpendicular to it, and diagonally through it, should be extended to all the types of vegetation you use in your training. In fact, changes of cover are the first obstacles I teach my young dogs while they are still in training for their TD titles. You can start by laying the last ten or fifteen yards of the track into higher cover. Your dog gets to the glove shortly after entering the new cover. I would include woods also at this time, even though it is not likely your dog will need this skill to earn his TD title. The track ending in the woods or high cover adds to the excitement of the track and can therefore help with any lingering motivation problems you might be dealing with, so why not give it a try?

Later, lay tracks so they go both in and out of the cover change before the dog gets the glove. If your dog has trouble, do not allow him to become frustrated. Move up on the lead, verbally encourage him, and at the slightest movement on the dog's part in the correct direction, go with him. Later, of course, when the dog has more experience and more confidence, wait for the dog to commit before following him. At the very beginning, however, you may even have to take the dog's harness in your hand and gently walk the dog forward until he discovers the track continues in the new cover and then let go of the harness as he moves out on his own.

I suggest that you concentrate on only one or two different obstacles when you begin your obstacle training. Be sure the dog is comfortable handling those obstacles in a variety of settings before moving on to some different obstacles. Again have the dog master the new obstacles in a variety of settings before moving on to additional obstacles. Continue in this way until your dog has mastered every obstacle you could think up for him.

Remember, too, that you can physically help a dog over an obstacle like a fence if he cannot get over it by himself but, in general, a dog should be expected to manage the obstacles on his own.

For the most part, dogs do not fail TDX tests on obstacles. They are more likely to fail because of the track's age or crosstracks, so do not spend an inordinate amount of time training obstacles. Do not load up a single training track with nine or ten obstacles. You will very likely have only two or three on a regulation AKC track. Regulation tracks must not have an obstacle on the first leg of the track, but I would expose my dog to this scenario anyway on his training tracks. The regulations also state that obstacles must be more than thirty yards from an article or a crosstrack. I would regularly break this rule,

too, in my training to be sure my dog was ready for anything. Because there is no minimum yardage requirement between turns and obstacles, be sure to practice them in close proximity. For example, lay a track heading straight up to a road, but turn just before it. On another day, cross the road and make a turn immediately after the crossing. On still another occasion, cross the road and continue ahead in a straight line.

This brings me a final training tip that you might want to remember when approaching an obstacle like a stream, road, or gully that you are going to cross. Look carefully at the direction you are traveling as you *approach* the obstacle. Try to locate an object on the other side of the obstacle that appears to be on the straight line you are walking. After you and your dog have maneuvered over or through the obstacle try to refocus on your object to help you regain your bearings.