



Training Cover Changes

By Rosemary Janoch

Teaching your dog to handle cover changes is important if you plan on earning a TD title, and an absolute necessity if you plan on earning a TDX title. The difference in training for the two titles is simply a matter of degree.

Trainers new to the sport sometime believe there are no cover changes on a TD track. This is not true. In my 30 years of enjoying this sport, I have only had one dog fail to earn his TD title on his first attempt and that failure was due to a cover change. His track started in ankle high grass and made two turns before heading for a section of the field that had not been mowed in a while. The grass had grown to over knee height. He tracked up to the cover change and stopped like he had come to a brick wall. He worked back and forth along the edge of the taller grass, but never went in it. As his frustration grew, so did mine. I could clearly see the beaten down grass straight ahead of me. The entire leg was visible but, unfortunately, I had a young dog on the end of the lead that had not been sufficiently trained in cover changes. Vowing to never make that mistake again, I now make cover changes an integral part of my training program.

Because many inexperienced dogs do tend to regard higher, thicker vegetation as an impassable wall, you may want to start your dog in the higher cover first and have him work out of it onto the lower grass. In general, a dog is more likely to break out of the higher vegetation into an open field than he is to work into the thick growth.

Once he is confident and can do that change well, have him work from the low cover into the high. It would be best if you could initially avoid making the cover change too extreme. It would also help to place an article shortly after entering the new cover and to have the wind blowing into the dog's face. The smell of the glove or toy will encourage the dog to enter the new cover.

Many fields near me are mowed in strips. The height of the cut grass and uncut grass only varies by about 6 to 8 inches. That is a reasonable change to expect even a young dog to handle.

If you can find a field near you that has strips mowed in it, use it to its fullest advantage. Have a leg put in that cuts across the high and low grass. Turn in the high grass and put a leg down one of the rows. Make another ninety degree turn so you are tracking across the strips again. On the next turn, put the leg on the short grass. This track would give your dog a healthy dose of cover change in a single track. If your dog can handle that track well, try a leg that cuts across the mowed strips diagonally. A dog that can competently run that track is ready to move on to more difficult cover changes.

When you wish to introduce a new cover to your dog, I would suggest that you simply take your dog for a walk through the new cover before you actually lay a track in it. For example, if your dog has never smelled a pine forest before, go on a hike with him through the woods and accustom him to the various new odors found there before you expect him to track through those odors. Your dog needs to realize that the pine odor, in this instance, is not what he needs to focus on. It is nothing more than a background scent.

The more frequently you expose your dog to various ground covers, the quicker he will learn the pertinent odors to follow (body scent, disturbed earth, etc.) and which odors can be ignored. If you do this often enough, your dog will generalize the training and will handle new cover changes as a matter of course even if he has never seen or smelled that particular cover before.

Introduce each new cover slowly and patiently. Take baby steps when entering a cover change to help the dog stay on the track. When handling him at that spot, move forward with him at the slightest indication on his part that the track goes there. As your dog becomes more confident, make him give a firmer commitment to the new cover.

Be sure to add vegetation that presents a handling problem to your list of cover changes. This would include briars, blackberry bushes, and multi-flora rose. You need to practice in this type of vegetation for two reasons. Firstly, you can learn your dog's typical behavior when confronted with that type of vegetation. Does he plow right through it, or does he work his way around it to the track on the other side? This is a valuable piece of information to know when you are running a blind track at a test and your dog tracks directly up to that type of vegetation.

Secondly, you need to practice in that nasty stuff once in a while to work on your handling skills. At the same time that you are learning to manage the lead without getting it snagged on everything, your dog is learning that a pull on the lead is *not* a correction. As your handling skills improve and as the dog learns that an occasional tug on the lead while maneuvering through heavy cover is not a signal to stop tracking, working a track through this type of cover will no longer be intimidating to either you or your dog.

Woods are harder for some tracking teams than others. Much of the difficulty depends on whether you have a casting fool on the end of your line. If you do, woods will most probably always be a challenge for you.

I generally teach a dog to go into woods before I teach him to come out. I have found that a dog exiting the woods will often scent up and down along the edge of the woods and will be hesitant to move out into the open field where the scent may have dissipated. I teach the dog to go into woods first by putting the last 5 or 10 yards of the track in the woods. This technique, by the way, is useful with any cover change since the smell of the final article generally lures the dog forward into the new change of cover.

Be very methodical in your training of woods. Start with woods that are relatively open and then progressively move to thicker and thicker woods with longer and longer distances to track before the dog finds the article.

Try an open turn in the woods before you ask your dog to do a ninety degree turn. When your dog can do two ninety degree turns to form a U track, it is time to teach your dog how to exit the woods while still tracking. Place an article or toy a mere 6 or 8 yards straight ahead after exiting the woods. This teaches the dog to move out into the field rather than scenting back and forth along the wood line.

Placing the article or toy directly ahead of the dog will encourage the dog forward, *but* I must warn you that you don't just want to encourage the dog to mindlessly blast out of the woods. It is possible that the track turns as it leaves the woods, so be careful not to pattern train your dog to always expect the track to go forward. Keep a log of your training sessions so you know how many times you had the track go straight ahead, how many times you had the track turn right, and how many times you had the track turn to the left as you exited the woods. The log will keep you from pattern training your dog.

Lead handling in the woods takes practice. Keep the lead off the ground in a comfortable arm position. In training, stay close to the dog and keep the lead taut to prevent tangling it around trees. Use lots of clothespins or markers through the woods so you are certain of the track's location. Keeping the dog right on the track at this stage of the game will eliminate problems later.

If the dog does wrap the lead around a tree, one option is to drop the lead and call him to you. If he is badly tangled, however, it might be best to go to the dog, unclip the lead from the harness, untangle the lead from the vegetation, and then reattach it to the harness. Keep the dog under control while doing this by placing him into a sit stay or down stay. Teach him to be patient and wait for you finish untangling the lead before he resumes tracking. This practice will come in handy if the lead becomes tangled at a test. Be sure at this time that your dog has a reliable restart because, depending on how difficult the vegetation is, you may have to restart your dog multiple times.

At an actual tracking test, keep your wits about you while on the track. If you are fairly certain that you are standing on the track when the dog becomes tangled at the end of the 40 foot lead, mark your position somehow so that you can return to it when the dog has been freed. Find a distinctive visual cue to help you orient yourself in the woods, like a rock, or a broken limb, etc. If nothing is distinctive enough to help you get back to that specific location, drop your hat or something else that is handy so that you know *exactly* the spot you left. Remember that tracking is a team sport and you must hold up your end of the bargain. You must be an anchor when your dog is casting for a turn. Always know the last location where you were *certain* your dog was on the track and be able to back up to that location. This means that you must keep yourself oriented in the woods. Don't just follow the dog willy nilly through the woods and have no clue where you are or where you were. Keep in mind that the AKC rules allow you to move up on the lead when tracking through difficult cover, so don't stay at the end of the 40 foot lead through the entire track. Teach your dog to tolerate you walking behind him at various distances. At one training session, be 40 feet behind him and at the next session be only 10 feet behind. Be sure your dog is comfortable with you moving up the lead while he is tracking. This is an absolute necessity if the two of you are approaching a road. I move up the lead so that the dog and I are crossing the road together. Does your dog let you move up the lead without losing his concentration? All it takes is a little practice.

A command that I have always found handy in the woods is "go around". I teach this command to young puppies when I take them for walks. If I walk on the right side of a telephone pole and the puppy walks on the left side, I quickly make the leash go taut so he cannot move

forward. I then say "go around" and help the puppy back up a step or two and get around the telephone pole. We continue on our walk and it happens again at a fire hydrant, then later at a stop sign, and still later around a tree. Be honest, folks...doesn't this happen to all of us at least a half dozen times each time we take a puppy for a walk? I use these situations to do some early training that will come in handy a year later when we are tracking through the woods together for the first time. That one simple command will certainly not eliminate the need to untangle the lead each and every time your dog gets tied up, but it will greatly cut down on the number of times you must go to the dog to free him.

Remember, however, that in the initial training stages, you should stay close to the dog and keep the lead taut to prevent any tangles. If you have put a sufficient number of clothespins and markers along the way, the track through the woods should be very clear to you. Keep your dog on the track at all times. I will even use my "go around" command if the dog tries to track to the left of a tree that I definitely remember walking to the right of. In these early stages, try to impress on the dog that he is not to air scent but, rather, is to keep his nose on the ground and follow the footprints.

As you work your dog through the various cover changes, be aware of the fact that the different types of vegetation will hold different amounts of scent. Be patient with your dog as he tries to work through the changing odors. Stay close to the dog in the beginning. Cut back on the track's age if necessary. Don't rush the dog but, rather, let him work out the problem for himself. Step in only if he seems to be giving up and is moving on to other things, like mouse hunting. A dog that gives up working on the track has probably been pushed too far and too fast in his training. Back up to a cover change that is less severe to encourage success. Remember that in training cover changes, the way to teach your dog to move ahead confidently is to take baby steps in the beginning.