



Training Groups

By Rosemary Janoch

Tracking is a sport you can enjoy without much outside assistance. You can drive to tracking sites, lay your own tracks, run your dog, keep a log on any successes or problems you had, and return home...all without the company of fellow trackers. Eventually you might want to team up with someone when you need a blind track, a crosstrack or the distraction of having someone following your dog, but for the most part the training can be done without anyone else's help. So why would you want to be part of a training group? I would like to address this issue from both the experienced and inexperienced tracker's viewpoint.

The inexperienced tracker is no different than a newbie in any other sport. There is a considerable amount of knowledge that is yet to be gained. Tracking with a training group that includes experienced trackers provides the opportunity for newbies to gain knowledge about the tracking rules and regulations, track laying, effective use of terrain, good handling techniques, and how to read a dog.

Beginners can learn about the best equipment to use and where that equipment can be purchased. This would include both dog equipment like harnesses, leads, collapsible water bowls, tick spray, etc. and human equipment like flags, articles, rain gear, gators, hats, boots, and sunscreen. The handler's equipment might also include a few good tracking books. It is hard to read all the books currently on the market so an experienced tracker can direct the newbie to a select few that should be read first. It might even be possible to borrow a tracking book from one of the members in the training group thereby saving the expense of purchasing the book. Trying out someone's harness on your dog before buying one is also a possibility. If you decide that the harness you tried is not really to your liking, you could then direct your search to a different harness manufacturer. If the harness *is* to your liking you can now save a great deal of time by ordering the exact style and size of harness you want without having to search far and wide.

The newcomer can also get information concerning tracking tests and what sort of terrain is typical of the area. They learn which clubs have fields to die for and which clubs are a little disorganized. They learn the names of judges in the area who they should seek out for certifications.

Experienced trackers, however, can also profit from being a member of a training group. They get to promote the sport they love by helping newcomers learn to track. These newcomers will hopefully become track layers and crosstrack layers at one of the local tests. They might even jump into the job of test chairman or test secretary, so cultivating an interest in the sport of tracking is certainly of benefit to the experienced tracker.

Tracking with newbies gives the experienced tracker warm bodies that can be used to lay crosstracks. Watching the beginners track can give experienced trackers practice in reading breeds other than their own and in seeing various tracking styles. Both of these would be particularly of interest if the experienced tracker is contemplating becoming an AKC judge.

The experienced trackers can also get lots of exercise laying tracks for the inexperienced trackers who have no idea how to walk in a straight line, and they can practice tossing gloves and toys into the air while making happy noises for puppies doing their first track. This will keep them in practice for when they get their next puppy.

When you ask a newbie to lay a track for your dog and errors occur in the laying of the track, you can use the situation as a learning opportunity for both the track layer and the dog. I remember asking an inexperienced individual to lay a short track for my dog who was in training for his TDX title. She walked across a set of railroad tracks on the first leg, dropped an article on the far side of the tracks, and then made an immediate turn to the left. My dog had to negotiate an obstacle, find an article, and determine the direction of a new leg all within a distance of one yard. Was this a track laying error? Of course it was. Did my dog do it? Yes, although he had to do some serious convincing since his handler, who was astonished to find an article on the edge of the tracks, was dumbfounded to watch her dog trying to make a turn at the article! If you can keep your sense of humor at such times and not lose your temper with either the dog or the track layer, these bizarre situations turn into great teachable moments.

Training with people new to the sport of tracking can provide a pleasant distraction for an experienced tracker when TDX tracks need to be fully aged. Instead of twiddling your thumbs for three hours, you can pleasantly while away the time helping someone start a new dog. The time will fly by and perhaps you can then convince the individual you were just helping to follow along behind you as you run your dog. They will not only learn from watching you but they can also help pick up flags, clothespins, and other field markers for you so that you don't have to pick them up on the fly as you track your dog.

There are advantages in being in a training group that apply to both the experienced and inexperienced trackers. For example, there is safety in numbers. If your car battery dies, you run out of gas, or you twist your ankle in the field, someone is there to help.

Both sets of people have the opportunity to make new friends and expand their "doggie contacts" so that the next time Aunt Bertha is looking for a new Pekinese puppy you can introduce her to a member of your training group that just happens to breed champion Pokes. The new contacts might also clue you in to new fields that you were unaware even existed. Since we all know that a dog should not be trained in the same

field over and over again, learning of new fields that are available for use is invaluable information.

Speaking of puppies brings to mind the wonderful opportunity both groups have to socialize their puppies with friendly people and friendly dogs away from the safety and security of the puppy's own backyard. Puppies will learn to wait patiently in a car until it is their turn to play the game.

Both sets of people are often given extra motivation to track since the group is expecting them to show up. Perhaps food is involved which makes it even more fun! I once belonged to a training group of three trackers who met on a weekly basis to train three TDX hopefuls (a Golden, a Lab, and an English Cocker). One of us was responsible for bringing the food which could be donuts, bagels, muffins, fruit, or whatever she wanted to bring that week. The second person brought the drinks which was usually orange juice, water, or soda. The third person got the week off and had to do nothing but track and eat. We alternated the jobs each week. The breakfast was eaten while the tracks were aging and as we happily munched on the goodies, we had an opportunity to pick each other's brains concerning training issues. Having three members in our group was perfect as all three of us were training for TDX. Since we plotted our own tracks, the other two people were free to put in the crosstracks. It was a system that worked beautifully for us and we stayed together in the group until all three of our dogs were successful in passing a TDX test.

As with all things, there are potential aggravations in belonging to a training group. Some members of the group may arrive late thereby messing up your plan for crosstracks. Perhaps they don't show up at all or cancel at the last minute. If a member of the group is laying a blind track for you, track errors can be aggravating, especially if you are specifically working out a problem with your dog and the individual laying your track ignores your instructions. Miscommunication between members of the group might result in fouled tracks. If your group includes an aggressive dog (or person!) the experience might be more stressful than what it's worth.

Keep in mind that there are so many advantages to tracking with a group that they far outweigh any possible down side. The many opportunities for fun and fellowship make it worth your while to track with others. Start your own group and see how well it goes!