

# Turns

By Rosemary Janoch

Once your dog is doing a 100 yard straight line track well, it is time to introduce turns. If your dog, however, is wildly casting from one side of the track to the other, is uncommitted to the track, or is looking back to you constantly for help, I suggest you continue to work your dog on straight line tracks for a while. Increase your dog's motivation to track with shorter tracks and better goodies at the glove until your dog is doing the 100 yard tracks well and then move on to teaching turns.

There are a variety of methods that have been successfully used to teach turns. One method is to turn your straight line track into a gently sweeping arc. Gradually increase the sharpness of the arc until it becomes a 90 degree turn (see Figure 1). A similar method involves a serpentine track. The track gradually snakes its way through a field. Increase the sharpness of the serpentine track until the dog is doing a series of left and right turns (see Figure 2).

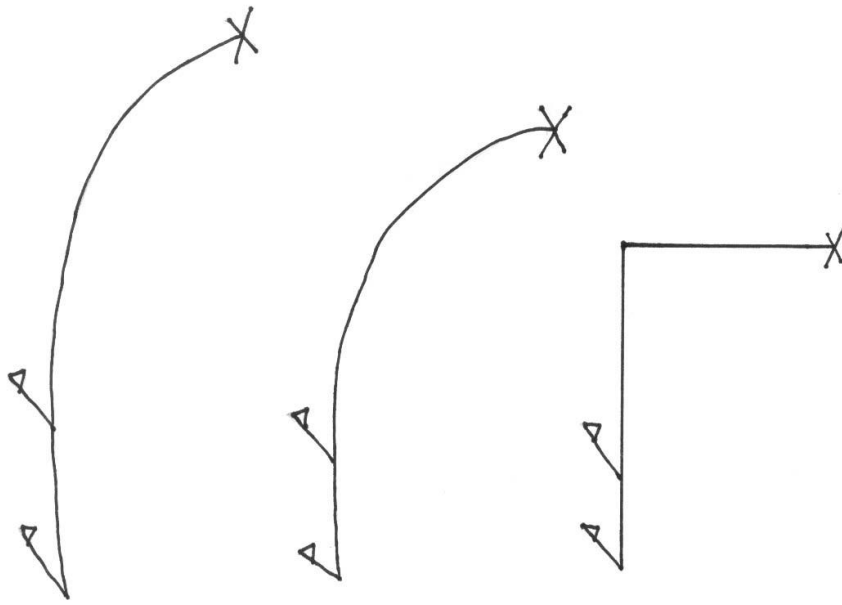


Figure 1

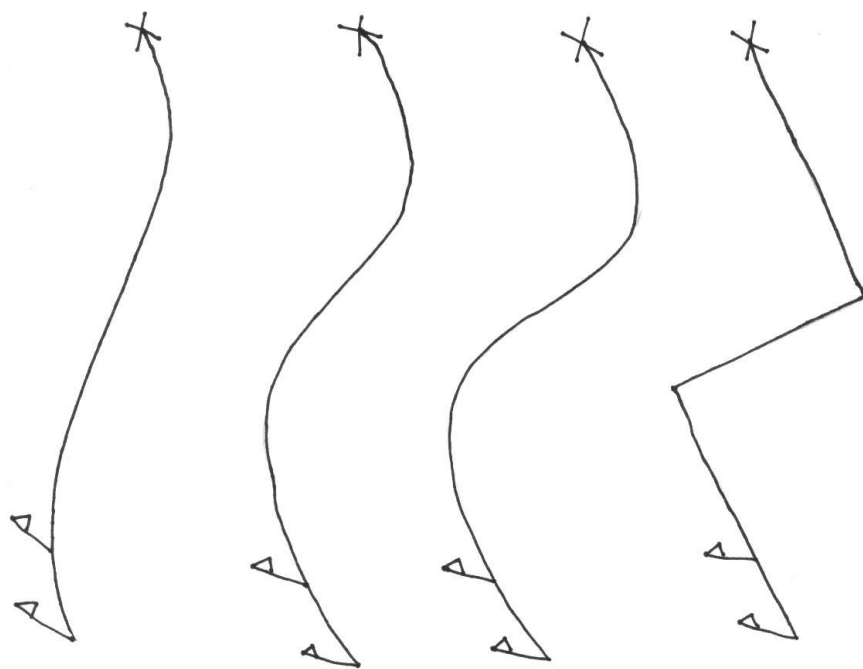


Figure 2

I generally start my dogs on 45 degree turns after they have been doing straight line tracks well (see Figure 3). Usually the dog comes to the end of the straight line, stops tracking, and looks bewildered. That is the time to encourage the dog to look for the new direction of the track. If necessary, point to the ground to get the dog's nose smelling again. Take a step or two forward in the new direction of the track. I have found that my dogs only needed a few experiences with 45 degree turns before they were ready for full 90 degree turns. I have known many trainers who don't even bother with the 45 degree turns. The first turn their dog sees is a 90 degree turn. Whatever method you decide to use, be sure to practice the turns to both the left and right.

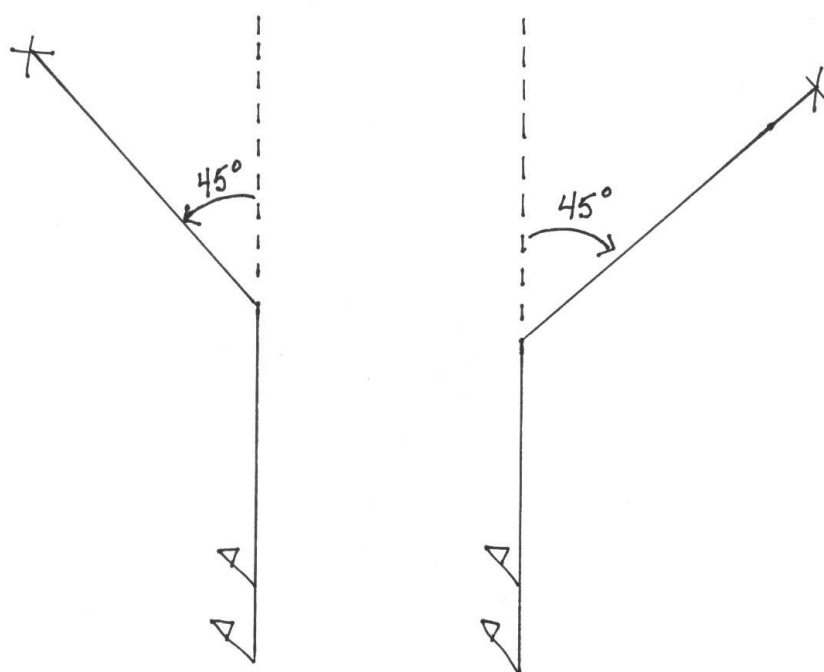


Figure 3

- The secret to doing turns well at a tracking test is the handler's ability to read the dog's body language. A handler learns to read the dog's body language through weeks and weeks of doing turns that are well marked. You cannot learn to read a dog's change in behavior at a turn unless you know precisely where the turn is located. Turns are frequently marked with flags, wooden clothespins, or natural ground markers.

- Flags can be purchased, but it is easy to make homemade ones by tying a strip of cloth onto a stake. If cloth strips waving in the breeze distract your dog, paint the tips of the stakes a bright visible color for yourself and omit the cloth. In high cover, rugged terrain, and woods, use brightly colored clothespins. You can purchase the plain brown spring-type wooden clothespins at your local hardware store or Wal-Mart. Paint the clothespins by stretching a rope between two trees. Hang the clothespins on the rope. Spray the clothespins first with white paint. Then spray on a second coat of a bright color that can be seen from a considerable distance. Blaze orange and florescent pink are popular choices. Avoid browns, greens, beiges, or any other color that will blend with the natural surroundings. Wait for a relatively windless day and be sure to stand upwind before spraying your clothespins. Take this advice from someone who learned the hard way! You can purchase multicolored plastic clothespins that don't require the spray paint, but I find that they break too easily.

If you are using natural ground markers to indicate your turns, be sure to pick distinctive ones. Turning at a thistle in a field full of thistles is not a good idea since the marker you have selected is not distinctive. Will you be able to identify the thistle you turned at from 10 or 20 yards away so that you can read your dog's turn indication? If not, choose a different ground marker. Unusual plants, distinctive weeds, boulders, change of vegetative color, or ground debris like a discarded can or wrapper can all be used effectively to identify turns.

If you wish to make turns easier for your dog, try one or more of the following:

1. Make the turn *into* the wind so the scent of the new leg is blowing towards the dog.
2. Put an article or food shortly after the turn to increase the dog's motivation to turn and also to provide a reward for turning.
3. Take baby steps for the first 5 or 10 yards after the turn to provide the dog with extra scent to help him locate the new leg of the track.
4. Turn in thick, lush vegetation which will create a tunnel of scent for the dog to follow.
5. Avoid all of the situations listed below.

If your dog makes turns well and you want to challenge your dog by making the turns more difficult, try one of these suggestions:

1. Turn on a downhill slope which encourages most dogs to overshoot the turn.
2. Turn into a crosswind.
3. Make the turn on sparse vegetation or bare ground.
4. Deliberately overshoot the turn and then retrace your path several steps before making the turn. Your dog will be forced to look behind you to find the turn.
5. Make an acute turn.
6. Turn in a dip or low area where scent tends to pool.
7. Turn near hedgerows, buildings, fences, tree lines, etc. where scent tends to swirl.
8. Make a turn at a change of vegetation.

Challenging your dog with difficult turns is fine as long as you keep in mind that tracking needs to be fun and motivational for the dog. Do not throw so many challenges at your dog that he begins to see tracking as a stressful, difficult, non-rewarding experience. You want to give your dog many positive happy experiences working out turns and finding the new legs of the track. Build on each of the dog's successes and add challenges as he is ready for them.