



VST Thoughts
By Rosemary Janoch

I think the path to a CT title is a unique one for each handler since all of us have our own set of skills and weaknesses as well as owning and loving our own particular dog who brings his own set of skills and weaknesses to the table. With that in mind, I would not presume to tell you how to train your own dog for the rigorous challenge of Variable Surface Tracking. I will, however, offer my own “Top Ten” list of training tips that helped me on my journey to the CT title with my six year old, Brinks.

- 1) Age is your friend. Having put TDX titles on many dogs and moving the age up on their TDX tracks incrementally actually stymied my VST training. I kept trying to make the tracks just 10-15 minutes older than the previous successful track and I just couldn't seem to get Brinks over the 2 hour hump. Multiple trainers told me to go directly to 3 and 4 hour old tracks. Since I couldn't get him to work successfully on a 2 hour old track, putting him on a 3 hour old track made no sense to me. When I finally stopped fighting the issue and saw how much more successful he was on the older tracks, I never again put him on any track that was fresher than 3 hours. In fact he rarely ran tracks that were fresher than 3.5 hours. I saw little to no difference in running a 3 hour old track and a 5 hour old track and so I generally ignored the time all together as long as it was over 3 hours. Knowing that the age of the track is not really an issue for the dog gave me a tad

bit of extra confidence at the VST tests I entered. Unless you draw the first track, it is unlikely that you will be put on the start flag at 3 hours exactly. Get used to starting on a 4 or 5 hour old track and then you will not panic when it happens at a test.

- 2) Get used to losing articles. They will blow away, be picked up by helpful strangers who will throw them away, or will be picked up by random people or animals and taken away. This was another difficult concept for me to wrap my brain around. When I put out an article on a TDX track, I expect to find it three hours later. This was especially frustrating to me because I use an article as a reward for Brinks. Whenever I gave him a difficult VST scenting challenge, I made sure he got an article shortly after so that we could stop and celebrate his success. Invariably, the little pink plastic cookie cutter was just too cute for someone to walk past or the metal strainer looked like something that could be used at home and the articles would disappear. I learned to never get too attached to any one article since it might vanish the next time I used it. I learned to shop for cheap articles at garage sales. I learned to smash cute little metal boxes so they looked like nothing that anyone would ever want to pick up. I learned to accept the fact that my dog might have to track from the start flag to the end of the track without finding a single article. I learned to continuously change the articles Brinks found so that he never became accustomed to finding a predictable set of items. The only time I would repeatedly use the same article was if Brinks had trouble finding it or would not give me a definitive article indication with it. In that case, I would use the article over and over until he would reliably indicate it and then it would only be used sporadically from that time on. When my husband noticed my frustration mounting with all the articles that would be missing from my tracks, he put labels on several items that said "Dog training article...please do not remove." Helpful people would see these articles on the ground in the park and would place them on top of picnic tables for me. I just finally learned to accept that my articles would disappear.
- 3) Train regularly. Each of our dogs is different but I would suggest a minimum of once a week. You will progress faster, however, if you train more often. Going out every once in a while to play with VST training didn't get me anywhere with Brinks. When I got serious and made an effort to regularly train and kept a log of what worked and what didn't, Brinks improved in leaps and bounds.
- 4) Change your training site. Just like in TDX you might have to go across town to find woods that have a stream going through them, you might have to go across town to find the shopping center that has a flight of stairs connecting an upper parking lot with a lower parking lot. When your dog does those stairs like a champ, you need to go somewhere else and teach him to deal with mulch islands. When he has that mastered, you need to move on to another site. Don't keep training your dog in the same location because it is convenient. If work keeps you late and it gets dark, plan on using a site that has lights like shopping centers and hospitals. Train in areas that are unlit during the daytime hours on the weekends. Check to see if a tracking friend can lay a track for you in the afternoon so that it will be properly aged and ready to run when you get home from work. Be adventurous and get to know all the good tracking sites in your town.

- 5) Mark your turns. At some point or another you *will* have a mental lapse and forget which line in the parking lot you turned on. Learn to carry a piece of chalk in your back pocket and always mark a non-vegetated turn. Not knowing exactly where the turn is located is a disaster when you are trying to help your dog. When working with a TD dog I generally slow down and put a bit of extra pressure on the lead when approaching a turn as I want the dog to indicate the turn quickly and not just blast past it. At the beginning of Brinks' VST training, I did the same thing. After I felt he had the idea of how to turn on asphalt I no longer restrained him as he approached a turn and if he shot right on past the turn I went with him. I then helped him learn how to get back to the turn. Having a chalk mark on the ground at that point always helped me get directly and accurately back on the track if he overshot a turn. Seeing the chalk mark on the ground as we approached a turn in a parking lot also helped me learn to read my dog's body language on NV turns. It is not the same body language he gave me in a field. You may find that reading your dog is a struggle at first since it will probably change from what you are used to. Marking turns gives you a pinpoint opportunity to study your dog's body language.
- 6) Get off the painted lines. I used the painted lines in parking lots when Brinks was green and needed help. He found the paint lines ridiculously easy to follow. In fact he learned to follow them so well that it was a struggle to get him off of them! You and your dog need to get comfortable on the unpainted surfaces of the parking lots and just put the track on a painted line when your dog needs a confidence boost or you just want to give him a special treat.
- 7) Speaking of treats, if you are using them on, in, or under the articles get them away from the articles and put them in your pocket to insure that your dog is actually looking for the scent of an article and not the scent of food. I frequently rewarded Brinks with food at the articles but the food came from my pocket and not from the article. Also, I made sure he could do a complete VST track with no food on me at all so that he would not be shocked at a test when no food was forthcoming. On those tracks he got lots of petting and praise but no treats. I never stop celebrating with any of my dogs (TD, TDX, or VST) when they find an article. I am always delighted and I tell them how wonderful they are, but they don't always get food. Remember that food will also attract other dogs to your articles since they will be out there for 3-4 hours (ants, too!) so separate the articles and the food as quickly as possible.
- 8) Don't stop training vegetation. Tracking a 5 hour old track on grass that is manicured to a height of 2 inches is tough for a dog. Keep a balance in your training between the vegetated and the non-vegetated surfaces.
- 9) Learn to deal with contamination. I think this was my greatest weakness in my first VST attempt with Brinks. We drew the noon track at a college campus and in the three minutes it took me to put on his harness at the start flag, six people walked past the start flag. If this happened in just three minutes I can only imagine how many students walked over my start in the four hours it was aging. I had been training Brinks in deserted parking lots. What was I thinking? I revamped my training and was much more prepared for the second test (also on a college campus) where we passed.

10) Build stamina in both you and your dog. The VST track Brinks passed took 56 minutes. I had *never* tracked a dog for 56 minutes before that day. My dogs can typically earn their TD titles in 4-6 minutes and most of my TDX dogs hang out in the 15-20 minute range. Even a full length TDX training track where I am helping the dog master a new challenge might go on for 20-25 minutes. Tracking for an hour was new to me. I learned a whole new level of patience while Brinks worked out scenting issues. I also learned to appreciate what it means to have a dog with a good work ethic. Part of this is in the dog when we bring him home as a puppy, and part of this we can develop during our training sessions.

I hope some of the suggestions listed above help you on your way to your VST title. The one thing I feel certain about is that it will be a different journey for each of us!