

Tracking with Your Basenji

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This is a very basic, introduction-to-tracking sort of article. I have dropped in some of the experiences I have had with Amelia, who is very enthusiastic about tracking and very forgiving of my many mistakes and failures. She is just about ready to certify, and I have high hopes she will get her TD this year. But I have never put a tracking title on a dog, so take everything with a grain of salt.



All dogs can track. Surely you have been dragged across the yard, the field, the street by your Basenji, head down and flat out, after something you can't even see! The art of tracking training is to convince the dogs that it is worth their while to follow the track you want them to follow, and to find that glove some silly person dropped. It is sort of like what coursing would be if only the dogs could see the lure.

Tracking Tests: The three levels of tracking test in AKC are defined as follows (from the AKC website.)

Level 1 – Tracking Dog (TD): A dog earns a TD by following a track 440 to 500 yards long with three to five changes of direction.

Level 2 – Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX): The TDX is earned by following an "older" track (three to five hours) that is also longer (800 to 1,000 yards) and has five to seven directional changes with the additional challenge of human cross tracks.

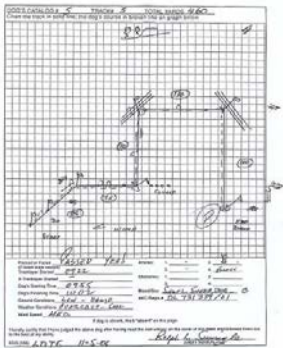
Level 3 – Variable Surface Tracking (VST): In the real world, dogs track through urban settings, as well as through wilderness. A VST dog has demonstrated this ability by following a three-to-five-hour old track that may take him down a

street, through a building and other areas devoid of vegetation.

All of these tests, graded pass or fail. There are no placements.

The handler is a minimum of 20 feet from the dog for TD and TDX, a minimum of 10 feet for VST. A dog needs to pass only one track at each level. Dogs that have passed at all three levels are Champion Trackers. Tracking trials take a huge amount of space. Entry limits may be as low as 2 or 3 dogs.

Before entering a TD test, a dog must be certified by an AKC tracking judge. The dog must successfully complete a track equal in complexity i.e. length, number of turns, age to a TD track in the presence of an AKC tracking judge. The certification usually takes place out-side the trial context. However, you may contact the trial secretary and ask if one of the judges would be willing to certify your dog after a trial. In the mid-Atlantic area, where I live, there are many judges available. I believe AKC will sometimes allow participation without certification for handlers who live too far from a judge to be



able to certify, but you would need to check with AKC on that.

Amelia's Certification Story

I trained Amelia all by myself. Literally – it was just us out there. When I tried to get her certified, she got to the first turn, glimpsed the “judge” walking behind us, and flipped. She spent the rest of the time we were out keeping an eye on that suspicious person following us, and totally ignored the track. You can train alone, but try to get someone to help occasionally. All they really have to do is follow you, but if you can get them to lay a track as well, it is gravy. Best of all is to get into a tracking class; some obedience clubs offer them, but they are few and far between, and often hard to get into. But they are so worthwhile, not to mention lots of fun!

Equipment

Dogs must wear a non-restrictive harness and a 20-to-40 foot tracking line. Dogs may wear a protective coat, but at a test, both coat and harness must be put on in the presence of the judge.





You will want tracking articles. In TD, a glove or wallet is used as the article. In TDX, there are 4 articles, one at the start, one at the end, and two on the track. They can't be identical, but should be about the size of a glove or wallet. In VST, there are four articles – one each of leather, plastic, metal and fabric. The tracklayer carries the articles, and places them on the track. In all three levels, one of the articles is placed at the start. The handler then picks up that article and carries it on the track, using it to give the dog the scent if necessary. And handlers pick up each article as they go, and show it to the judge. While the rules say a glove or wallet, usually gloves are used since wallets have a way of disappearing. I have been told “never use a really cute tracking article, „cause it won't be there when you run the track.”

Amelia's Story

I have had articles disappear off tracks, including one piece of leather that was chewed up and scattered on the other side of the footpath – an Amelia found the pieces! Bless her.

The good news is, once you start tracking, EVERYTHING becomes a tracking article. I am especially fond of plastic bottles and metal boxes, because I can put treats in them and reward Amelia on the track without encouraging her to go shopping. She does that on her own.



You'll also want flags. In TD, there are two flags, one at the start of the track and one 30 yards into the track. In TDX and VST, there is only one flag at the start. You will want more (and more! And more!) so you can mark turns. Some dogs (just saying, they are SIGHThounds, after all) get flag happy – they go straight from the first to the second flag. An easy fix for this is to put flags all along your tracks, and to put flags at random on the tracks. Packs of 100 flags are available at the big box home improvement stores.

We are not talking Old Glory here, these are construction site flags, a wire with a bit of colored plastic attached. You can also use clothespins, with a bit of surveyor's tape tied onto them, to clip to bushes or trees when



you are working on TDX tracks, or even stick them on clumps of grass.



And, finally, you want thousands of dollars worth of all-weather gear. Comfy, preferably water-proof, shoes are a MUST. Tracking tests are not called on account of bad weather. And if you get into one, you are definitely going to participate!



Teaching Tracking

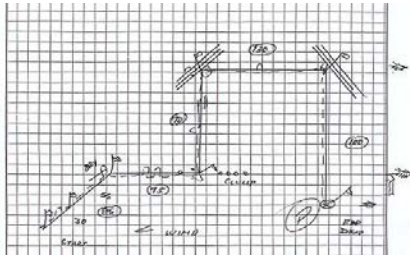
Sometimes when I am following Amelia and she is really tight on a track and just trucking along, it is like watching her lure course. Pure instinct in action – wow!

One of the things that I find fascinating about tracking is that we humans – with our snazzy opposable thumbs and big verbal brains – can't follow a track worth beans. We can't see it, can't sense it, don't know where it is. Even if we have laid the track ourselves, and know exactly where each footprint is, we can't know where the SCENT is, scent moves around, it behaves oddly, it may be drawn to water and building, or pushed away from them, and WE CAN'T TELL!

Keeping records is everybody's weak point, but it is really, really, really essential for tracking. You need to know: how long the track was, how old, what was the weather like, what happened at the turns, what surfaces you were on, what the dog did, what you need to work on next time. You are going to want to be able to tell when your dog is on the track, and when she's freelancing, and when she is just plain lost.

When you lay a track you must draw a map. You don't have to be a draftsman, but you have to draw something so you will know where your track actually is, no matter what the dog does,

or what happens. Even a poor map on a piece of notebook paper is better than nothing. **YOU WILL NOT REMEMBER WHERE THE TRACK IS. TRUST ME. DRAW THE FLIPPING MAP, ALREADY.**



So how do you teach a dog to follow the track you select?



There are a lot of ways; an infinite number of ways. Because of our inability to know where the scent is, there are many superstitious ideas about raining tracking. I have tried a lot of different methods, and done several different things with Amelia, and I have one conclusion – the only way to teach tracking is to go out, harness the dog, and do it.

What method of training works best will be up to you and your dog. In general, because it is so hard (aka impossible) to tell exactly what a dog is experiencing on a track, clicker training is not a good choice. It is distracting, and you don't know

what it is you are clicking. The clicker is still useful for teaching article indication, but not the actual track. Now that I have said that, three people are going to write in and say I taught my dog to a TD and clicked every step of the way. Good on „em! I do a lot of clicker training, Amelia is a very clicker-savvy dog, she adores her clicker, but on the track it is a distraction to her.

Similarly, corrections don't work well, because you can't know what you are correcting. I was tracing with a friend one day, and watched her call her dog off the scent. The track was beside a small pond, and the dog went to the pond. Chances are, the scent went to the pond too (water tends to collect scent.) When the dog was corrected for veering off the "track" he stopped trying. He is a very soft dog; when I've tried to pull Amelia off scent she just digs in and goes where she KNOWS the scent is. That is how she found the bits of article on the far side of the footpath. She said there is scent over there and I am going to it! And she did and it was.

There are actually two things to teach: one is, "follow the scent of the human" and the other is "show me what the human dropped," (article indication.)

Article Indication: How your dog does this is up to you, there are no requirements except that

the dog must clearly indicate the article. The dog can retrieve it, sit or lie down next to it, bark at it, paw at it, anything that floats your boat. At the moment, having the dog retrieve the article is out of fashion, because if you didn't see exactly where the dog found the article, you may not be able to restart the track. This isn't a concern in TD, where there is only one article at the end of the track, but in TDX and VST there are four articles, and you need to restart after each one of them. I taught Amelia article indication in the living room; I put down the glove, she looked at it, I asked for a down, she downed, click/treat. When she had the



idea that the glove was the cue to lie down, I named it "show me." When she was very reliable with going to the glove and lying down on the cue, "show me," I asked her to "Show me" as she came to the article on the tracks. Now she just takes the article as the cue to down.

Follow That Track: I started training Amelia with a method developed by Steve White, a police K-9 trainer from Washington State. I went to a seminar he gave and was quite impressed. He

starts dogs on asphalt, rather than grass. In fact, grass is the last surface he teaches. He uses distilled water sprayed on the track. You spray the water in front of you and then walk on it, while dropping food on the track. The theory is that the water helps hold the scent on the track, and the asphalt surface doesn't give off extraneous scents.

Following some Steve White training, I went to another seminar, this one with Donna Thompson (her book is listed in the bibliography, it is well worthwhile.) She doesn't use food on the track unless it is necessary to get the dog's nose down, and if she does use food she fades it as fast as possible. Her approach is to get the dog excited about finding the article. If your dog likes to play with things, play tug with the article. If your dog is not particularly toy motivated (that would be Amelia) put food in or on the glove. You can also use food containers as articles. I use a lot of plastic bottles, so Amelia needs me and my opposable thumbs to open them and get the treats. I have even put a jar of baby food into a glove, talk about Motivation with a capital M!

I have also read a bunch of books about tracking, and talked (cyber and fact-to-face) tracking with a lot of people. So, on the basis of a few seminars, two sets of classes, and a lot of fun, here I am writing a tracking training article.

Amelia's Story



If you are training Steve White style in a parking lot, with a sighthound, DON'T follow the white parking lines. It is not difficult to teach a Basenji to follow the white lines. I did it in two short training sessions. She was quite perturbed when I laid a track BETWEEN the lines, and she followed the lines and there was no food on them, UNFAIR! That said, nice thing about parking lots is there are lots of cross-tracks (the scent of someone other than the tracklayer.) And it is easy to count the parking spaces and know how long your track is, where the turns are, and so on.

Variable Surfaces

A lot of clubs are now starting to teach tracking on variable surfaces (grass, asphalt,

concrete, gravel, sand, dirt, etc.) right from the start. Ed Presnall's *Mastering Variable Surface Tracking* will give you a training plan for this. It seems to work well in getting dogs ready for testing. Personally, it is my preferred method, at least today.



Amelia's Story

You get what you train for. Amelia tracks better on asphalt than on grass, so we have been doing a lot of TD-style tracks to get her ready to certify. After a couple of weeks of practicing TD-style tracks, all on grass, as a special treat, I had a friend lay a track that ended by going into a parking lot, making a right-angle turn, then up a flight of concrete steps to another right-angle turn on the sidewalk, to ending on grass. Amelia adored it. Very often, in VST training, you will see a dog come to a right-angle turn on asphalt (called the Moment of Truth or MOT turn.) Very often, the dog will come to the turn, turn the wrong way, halt, stand for a moment, then whip around and take off in the correct direction. This gets me every time. It is as if the dog is testing one direction, reject it and going the other way. She did it on this track and it just choked me up.

Training Track Layout



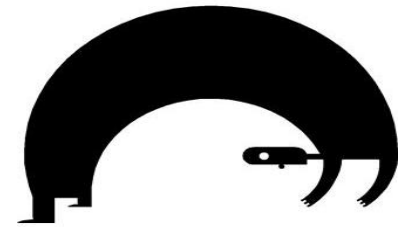
Most of the tradition tracking training books set out a schedule of training all on grass. Many, if not all, start with straight lines. Our local club has started doing a lot of initial training on serpentines, a series of essentially shallow half-circles. Easiest to do if you pick out an imaginary line, walk about 20 paces on a curving line, then 20 paces back, then 20 paces on the other side of your imaginary line, etc. Make it nice and open with no sharp turns. Put a flag in every 10 paces and you will know how long your track is. The theory is that dogs will have less trouble with turns if they are used to curving lines from the start. Gradually, as the dog progresses, you will change your half-circles to sharper angles, until you are laying a track that is a series of right-angle turns.

Food on the track, or not?



If you enjoy fights, try throwing this out to a bunch of trackers. People seem to be very, very FOR, or very, very ANTI. I think it depends on the dog. If you need to put food down to get the

dog to put its nose down, do it. If you don't if your dog is motivated enough by finding the article and having a rousing play session, don't. I do, sometimes, and sometimes I run an article track, where I put down an article every 15-20 paces and reward heavily for finding them. The club I am training with starts with food on the track, starting with a food drop every step, then every other, then maybe a couple in a row and then skip to the third step. This worked well for Amelia. I was surprised because she is a shopper anyway, but it didn't increase this tendency, and kept her head down. She stayed much tighter on the track, too. If you don't care to bend over every step to put the food in your footprint, and you can't toss the food accurately, you can take a PVC or cardboard tube (think wrapping paper) and drop the food through that.



Aging Tracks

If you didn't get a fight started with the food question, try asking how to age tracks. People have some very passionate beliefs. Again, a lot of the books will have you add age in increments, very slowly. I don't think you can go from 5 minutes to 5 hours in a day, but you can add quite a bit of age fairly quickly once the dog has caught

on. I have been told, also, that a lot of dogs who are used to older tracks have trouble on “hotter” i.e., fresher, tracks.

Amelia's Story

This one stunned me. I had been running tracks at 2-3 hours, and wanted to give Amelia an easy fast track. So I laid the track, went home and got Amelia, and returned to the park. Which was closed. By a very snippy police officer who told me she would ticket me if I parked elsewhere and walked in. So the following morning (12 hours later!) I went back to pick up the flags and articles. I took Amelia, figuring we would basically just go for a walk. SHE TRACKED IT. The only article she had trouble finding was a smooth plastic article. She found the metal (!), the cloth glove at the start had vanished, along with the flag and found the leather at the end which had been chewed up and strewn about. That's the spot where she said, “We Have To Cross The Pathway” and I tried to tell her we didn't. As the trackers say, **“Don't think, follow your dog.”**



Mandatory Warning

Tacking can be habit-forming. You may find yourself wandering around ungodly places at ungodly hours. You may suddenly discover that your house has been taken over by hug clumps of line, bunches and bunches of cheap gloves, and other miscellaneous objects. You may also find you have a very tired and happy Basenji.

References on the Web and Books

Search the internet for supplies and books. Pawmark, J&J Dog and 2DogLeash are good suppliers of tracking equipment. Some leather workers and tack stores can make you an adjustable leather harness. Some people use rock-climbing rope for long lines. It is available from outdoor-type stores. Make sure you get the good stuff, with the better core.

There are many, many, many tracking books. I have a lot of them, and have read a lot. You will get something useful out of almost any of them. All of the following, and more, are available from Dogwise on the internet. But these are the ones that seemed most useful to me:

Clothier, Suzanne and Rice, John, **Following Ghosts: Developing the Tracking Relationship** has more discussion of observations of what the dog does while tracking.

Granz, Sandy and Boyd, Susan, **Tracking from the Group Up** is also practical and spells out a very nice progression in training.

Hogan, Julie and Donna Thompson, **Practical Tracking of Practically Anyone** is very practical and spells out a nice training progression.

Presnall, Ed and Ballard, Lois, **Novice Nosework – a Primer for Beginning Trackers** is also pretty practical, but doesn't give as detailed a progression as some other books.

Presnall, Ed, **Mastering Variable Surface Tracking Book and Workbook** is fairly new. He starts tracking on variable surfaces, which I understand is now the popular training method in the Midwest. Well worth reading.

Sanders, William R., 1998, **Enthusiastic Tracking, The Step-by-Step Training Manual** has training progressions but is pretty rigid. You really don't have to track every day, and since you can't control the wind, why worry about it.

