

Handling the Tracking Line

by Dennis Helm

COMMUNICATING

Most tracking is done with a tracking line connecting the dog and handler. In Schutzhund the dog can be tracked off lead but I have never seen this done. I have tried to train my dogs to keep within the required 30 feet of me while tracking off lead but so far their concentration on the task at hand gets the best of the "Kids" and the distance widens to the point where we would not be successful in a Schutzhund trial. This is something to be worked on another day.

Many handlers do not realize the importance of proper tracking line handling. There is a constant flow of information flowing back and forth between handler and dog. Learning to read what the dog is telling us is important.

During November of 1998, Panda and I were going to try for our 2nd FH2 tracking title. We had spent several days training on a flat river flood bottom where the tracking trial would take place on the following weekend.

After working several FH2 level tracks through all the possible obstacles, I felt we were ready. On the day of the trial everything changed. During the night and while our track was aging for the necessary 3+ hours we had combination of rain and high wind. The flood plane and sparse dead vegetation left over from earlier flooding left little workable scent.

For the FH2 track the dog must find the starting article before the track can begin. Panda found the starting article without a problem. As I started her on the track I knew we were dead in the water from the way she felt on the tracking line. The combination of high wind, rain, and dead vegetation had caused her track to become unworkable. After the first 30 feet I knew we were through even though she was making a valiant effort to work the track.



Panda finding the starting article

Knowing how to use and read the tracking line comes with experience. The following is an exercise to help the handler understand his or her role as part of the tracking team.

One way to learn how to work and read the tracking line is through role-playing. For this exercise we will have an experienced tracker play the role of the dog and a new handler on the other end of the tracking line. With the tracking line attaching the team members they will attempt to work a pre-arranged track.



Keeping even tension on the tracking line

In this series of photographs Dr. May Jacobson has taken the part of the handler and Nila McKendry plays the tracker.

The handler is controlling the speed of the tracker as the line works through her hands. If there weren't the necessary control, the tracker would start moving fast or even be running down the track. If the handler does not keep an even pressure on the tracking line the "dog" will stand still, indicating confusion, until the situation is corrected.

An experienced person playing the part of the dog can greatly improve the handlers understanding of how to communicate with the tracking line. Insecurity as well as a feeling of confidence can be transmitted along the line. We do not want the dog distracted by what is or is not happening on our end of the line. The dog needs to be able to devote his total attention to the job of tracking.



Side to side checks



The "dogs" job is to track from footprint to footprint and not become distracted by other scents on or near the track. As the "dog" starts to show interest in a scent to one side or the other, the handler can stop until the "dog" comes back to the task at hand. Light jerks on the tracking line also get the "dog's" attention.

In the checking from side to side situation, we do not want the dog to get in the habit investigating scents which have nothing to do with the current track. If the dog's curiosity is not checked he may develop the problem of losing focus and wandering off the track. Such behavior is to be avoided. Many tracking teams fail because their dog loses focus and is unable to recover and finish the track.



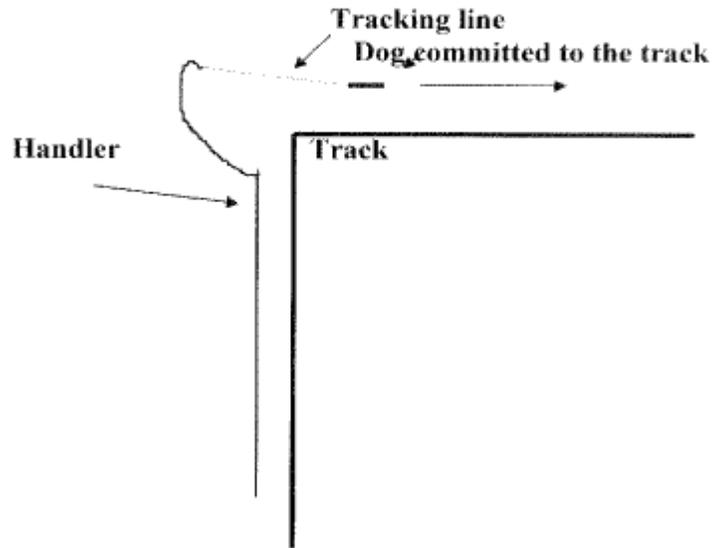
Indicating a turn

Both the handler and the "dog" in this exercise know where the track is going. If the dog tries to overshoot the turn the handler must stop thus causing the dog to search out the next leg of the track. Should the "dog" be beyond the turn the dog and handler can back up until the turn is found. Letting the dog develop the habit of making sloppy turns is not acceptable behavior.

The "dog", upon finding the turn, will hold up an arm to indicate the turn. For the new dog and handler keeping even pressure on the tracking line and the line as parallel to the dogs back as possible is important. We do not want the dog to become distracted by a change in the feel of the tracking line.

As the dog makes the turn the handler needs to swing out in the opposite direction of where the new leg of the track is going. This movement will help to keep even pressure on the tracking line and reassure the dog.

Negotiating a turn.



The handler does not start to swing out in the opposite direction the dog is taking until the tracker has committed itself to the new leg of the track. We do not want the dog distracted by a change on the handler's end of the line before he makes the turn.

After the turn is made the handler can leave the line at its current length and just make a wide arc. This should cause as little distraction as possible to the tracker. In the sport of Schutzhund the dog must be worked at the end of a 30-foot line so it is important for the Schutzhund tracker not to gather in the tracking line as the turn is negotiated.



Article Indication

As the dog indicates an article, the handler will drop the tracking line and walk up to the dog's right side and pick up the article and show it to the judge. When showing the judge the found article it is important to make eye contact with the judge.

After showing the article to the judge it is time to stroke the dog as a reward for finding the article. The stroking of the dog does several things:

1. The dog can relax knowing he has done well.
2. The dog now anticipates that he will be restarted on the track.

If this is the end of the track, heal your dog a short ways off the track and then give him praise and then heal him out of the area of the track. Remember that tracking is an obedience exercise. After you have healed the dog a short way away from the track you can then play with him.