

## **THE RIGHT TRACK**

### **Training Tips for Blood Tracking**

*Most people think about blood tracking work with their versatile hunting dog when they can't just simply load up the deer they just shot.*

The shot may have been a bit hasty and the wounded animal ran off into the brush. In the excitement you forgot to remember the spot where the deer stood as the bullet struck. "Ah well," you may think, "that's what old Fido has a nose for anyway! And he has passed all those test with VDD, he'll find it." And because the brush is thick and you forgot your tracking leash (or never owned one), you just let Fido go. Fido first checks the nearest square mile for some rabbits and quail and comes back a few minutes later - panting but happy. "Darn dog never does what I tell him to do!" you mumble angrily and give Fido a few hefty slaps with your belt to get his attention. Then you sharply command "dead deer"! Fido tucks his tail now and has lost his interest in rabbits, but will he track?

This may sound a bit familiar to some of you, others may say "fiction!". Unfortunately, it is closer to the truth than most of us imagine. It is also the background to an often unsuccessful search by the experienced handler and his tracking dog who is called after Fido's "bad day". "See, that track was so difficult that even the expert didn't get anywhere!" is the common reaction of Fido's owner after the unsuccessful search. In reality, it may have been a very easy track and chances for recovery of the meat may have been excellent. But Fido and his owner messed up the situation so badly, that in the end the deer suffered a slow and painful death - and meat, time and money was wasted. How can you avoid making some or all of the above mistakes? First, by getting Fido and yourself in shape to tackle a blood trail. If you have a pup, start him off right and teach him to track short trails (made of soup or meat juice) that always lead to his dinner dish. 5-25 feet long tracks are plenty long for a 8-week old pup and with a bit of practice, a 3-month old youngster can already master tracks up to 100 yards! This early work will teach your pup the two basic things about blood tracking:

#### **Nose down + teamwork = Food**

Both fundamentals are inseparably linked to the most important training tool: the tracking leash. It should be 24-36 feet long and made of soft, durable material (leather is best). A soft, pliable collar (non-choking!) is attached with a buckle and never is removed from the leash. Tracking with a long leash is a bit like holding the reins of a horse - it is the telegraph between you and your dog. With some experience, you will learn to "feel" your dog and "read" some of the difficulties he faces on the trail. But before you reach this level, you must spend a bit of time teaching your dog.

During blood tracking training, you must teach your dog two important lessons: (i) tracking is a very cool, calm job, where no nervousness or excitement is tolerated, and (ii) all dominance between dog and master ceases, i.e. you are now equal partners! As trackers, we never loose our temper and never punish the dog (remember: we can't **make** him track!). We move in slow motion and have endless patience, even if it takes us 3 hours to complete a 200 yard trail.

If our youngster shows interest in other scents than the track or loses the track we just stop, leash firmly in our right hand. Since we're not moving anymore, young Rover now may start to swing "like a pendulum" in front of us. The moment he crosses the track we gently give him some "rein" and help him along onto the track. If, however, he's too far off the track already (which shouldn't happen unless you're asleep!) - make him lie down. 2-3 minutes of rest will cool him off and you can then take him by the collar and put him back on the track where he lost it (I do not like the idea of carrying a 100 lb. Drahthaar through thick brush!). The same applies to a dog that gets excited or starts pulling strongly on the leash. By pulling the dog expends a lot of energy and furthermore "fights" the handler. Both is counterproductive and must be stopped early on. And if you are consequently pursuing this technique, your dog will later lie down automatically when he's lost the trail and cannot relocate it himself. Team spirit!

Once we reach the end of the trail (i.e. the hidden food dish with deer hide, road killed animal etc.) we're always extremely happy about this "find" - to the point of being silly. I personally like to make quite a show of this happiness by rolling on the ground, playing with the dog and yodeling (-make sure you're not watched by uninitiated onlookers)! The purpose of this is twofold: once, we simulate the excitement of the "kill" within the pack, and second we praise our dog's work. We take some time to sit with him, watch him eat and enjoy the companionship. If you now rush off to the office or dinner table you spoil much of the experience for you and the dog!

How much tracking work should you do? The best is to start early with a pup, but be careful not to overwork the dog. One track per week is about the maximum. Once he's "sour" (lost interest in tracking), you lose more than a few weeks correcting him (if at all possible), so it pays to take it slow. And always work the dog when he's hungry! After a few soup trails for the pup, you can switch over to drags of road killed animals, or game entrails. Whether you drag an item, drip or "dip" blood makes little difference in the beginning. Important is only that you and your dog get to the food at the end. Therefore, you must mark each track carefully, so you know the exact location of it - you can't help if you don't know where the track is.

Naturally, we want to sensitize our dog early to small scent particles, so we reduce the size of scent spots (from a dragged line to drops of blood) and increase the time between laying and working a track gradually. We never work a track younger than 3 hours, to make sure that most (human) scent has disappeared from the air layer above the ground. We want Rover to search for ground-based scent (blood, hair and the wounds left in the top soil by the wounded animal) - not scent particles lingering in the air! After 10-20 tracks, even a young dog should have no difficulties working over-night tracks. The difficulty of a track does not necessarily increase with its "standing time" or age. Length of a trail is often more important, as it requires a longer concentration period of your dog. Vary the length and age of tracks as well as the area.

Forest, pastures, brush land all are suitable to lay a track in. Crossing a pasture with livestock can provide opportunities to introduce distractions and difficulties, just like crossing or following roads.

If you consequently prepare your dog for blood tracking, you will notice a marked improvement of his nose. He will be a more reliable and cooperative pointer and retriever. Once you get "hooked" on blood tracking - and you'll discover how much fun you can have with a dog on a

string in the woods - you will agree with me that the true "crown" of all dog-dom is blood tracking. And most importantly, you have attained the highest goal of all hunters: To be a true conservationist and ethical sportsman.

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