

# SATS TRACKING CLINIC



**Sandra and Mark Lewindon  
September 2015**

***If you always do what you have always done,  
you will always get what you always got – anonymous***

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## **SATS TRACKING CLINIC**

Thank you for coming to the SATS tracking clinic, today is about enjoying our dogs and we hope that we can help you with your dog's tracking and have some fun along the way.

These notes are to assist in explaining some of the things we will be talking about and help you when you go home to think about bits and pieces we've discussed, which you may have forgotten and we don't want to assume knowledge.

First on the agenda **\*\*\*Apologies\*\*\*** we do not have any magic wands and cannot work miracles. The methods you hear us talking about today are not new; you will probably have already been told some of these training methods and have possibly forgotten. There are also many ways to teach tracking, doesn't mean that the methods we use are better than anyone else's, or that you should throw away what you already do, if its working for you, stick with it – if it ain't broke, don't fix it!

**Starting** at the beginning, with your new dog/ puppy, in a perfectly square field approximately 200 yards square, with lush damp grass, on a beautiful sunny, but not too hot day with a light breeze. (ha ha, if only).

The age at which you start to track your puppy will be a personal choice and everyone will have different opinions. What needs to be considered is dog's **AND** handler's capabilities. There's nothing wrong with starting puppies very young with a very experienced handler, but, would think twice if it's a new handler, they may not know when to stop or draw a line or get out of difficulties if it goes wrong. New handlers would be best to wait and take tuition from an experienced handler. There is one school of thought that the square should be taught first to build the article drive, some people don't teach tracking until the puppy is much older, it's your call.

Whatever the start it needs to be appropriate and with a tiny puppy I would not rule out "free style" tracking, i.e. titbits in each footprint for about 10 paces and no harness, just letting the puppy work it out. But, I do like to start in a harness straight away to differentiate between walking on the lead and pulling on a harness.

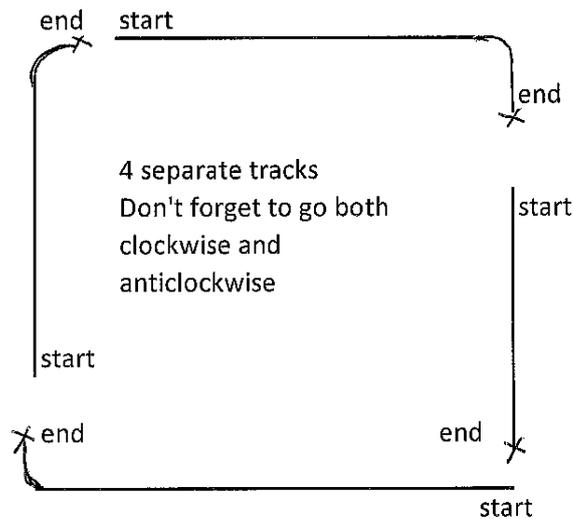
Initially consider wind direction and conditions. Mark prefers to lay with wind into the dogs' face; I prefer to lay with the wind coming from behind. Individual dogs react in different ways, so get to know your dog and try both, see what works best for your dog.

With somebody else holding onto the dog, place food in footprint by base of pole, then every footstep for about 20 paces culminating with the dogs toy at the end of the track, preferably being obscured from sight. At this stage the footsteps should be stomped and close together.

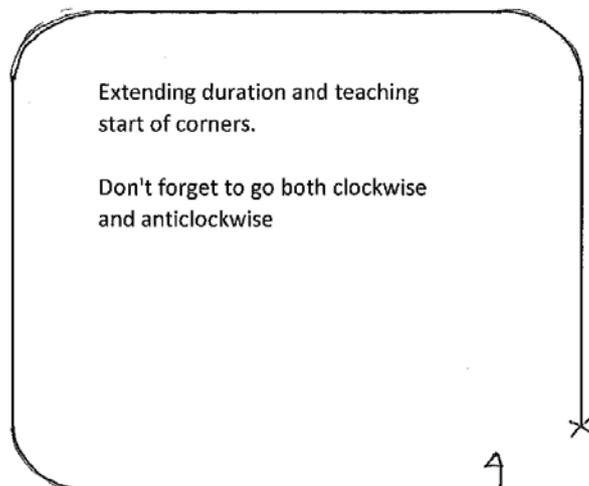


Use the gap between the end and start of the tracks as a “walk in”, set each up as a start, routine of what’s going to happen starts here. This is also a basis for “Starter Tracks” explained later.

When conditions are favourable and you can see where you have been or unless you are extremely confident about your track laying, rather than ending the track in a straight line, make a large curve (about 25 yards across). Put a treat just before you start the curve and make the curve a shuffled walk motion rather than normal walking, go straight and then put a treat and another 10-20 yards put the toy



Build up to a complete circuit .....



Don't forget to go both clockwise and anticlockwise. Dogs are left and right handed and you need to ensure they don't become too much one way or the other. Continue until dog concentrating all way round and curves have become less "stomped".

### **Aging, Conditions and Complexity of Track**

Always consider what impact the weather will have on your dog's tracking abilities. Cross winds may make them wander on and off the track, or "track on the wind" if tracks are fresh. When you change direction, the wind will be coming from a different direction too, you will probably notice the effect by tracking around the field, this will also give you an indication of your dog's preference for either wind into their noses or from behind. Once you've worked it out, try and gear your training towards their preferences – build for success.

Some people like to age their tracks in training, some don't. I always consider the conditions of the ground, the weather, the wind and complexity of the track.

My aging usually consists of laying the track, returning to my dog and possibly a cup of coffee and a chat and then working, so usually no more than 20 minutes old.

If the ground is particularly testing and conditions harsh, ie dry drill and hot sun, I would lay and work immediately without aging in any way. I would also not lay anything too complicated on bad conditions, perhaps just a straight line or starter tracks.

Conditions of the ground play a huge part of the success of the track. To illustrate this, at Surrey Open trial in February 2015, I put Jynx on the spare TD track. At this time she was only just about 6 months old and I hadn't really taught her corners, but, she had been tracking well and I knew where the track went. The conditions were lush damp grass, approximately 7-8 inches long. She tracked away from the pole as if it had just been laid, nobody had told her it was 3 hours old. She got round to the second article where I stopped her, she hadn't done that long a track before.

### **Articles**

Always consider the condition of the ground before deciding on your articles. You want something that holds scent, not harmful to the dog, not visible to the dog and achievable. A tiny green piece of string on grass would hold scent, is not harmful to the dog, not visible to the dog but achievable? Probably not, it is a very testing article and the only place for testing articles is in competition, in training build for success.

Also consider the weather, if it's windy, light articles might blow away; if it's hot, metal articles might pick up the heat. Mostly always consider your dog's capabilities. It will give the dog (and you) more confidence if you are successful. Train don't test.

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## **Fail Safes**

I start introducing articles from the beginning of the training; my dogs have never really known the difference between articles and toys. However, I would always finish a track with something I know I could have a game with, an article I can tug or a toy, which I am confident the dog will find. What I then do is use a “fail safe” and by that I mean place an article about 20 paces before the end of the track and then an interactive “article/ toy” at the end the track. If the dog then misses the penultimate article, I still have my fail safe article/ toy to finish on a good game. If they get the penultimate article, I might finish there, play with the article or produce an interactive toy from my pocket or I might track the last 20 paces, I try to vary.

## **Laying out of sight**

When you first start laying your tracks, its useful to have somebody to either hold your dog, or if the dog will accept it, tie them up and let the dog watch the track being laid. Always start by letting the dog watch the track being laid, they are usually naturally curious and if you attract their attention when you are laying a track, you can motivate them.

Once the dog has associated the idea of the tracking pole, harness and track, start to lay without the dog seeing the track being laid. If your dog becomes demotivated when you start this, it's probably not as confident as you think, go back to laying in sight. Even with a very experienced dog, it's very motivational to lay the track with them watching occasionally and certainly if you start laying “starter” tracks, you want them to watch and get excited before they start tracking.

## **“Walk Ins”**

In competition you should be shown where the track layer walked into the track from, commonly known as a “walk in”. There are various schools of thought on how or whether to walkins. Some people choose not to use them at all but take their dogs to the start pole, some people use only a few paces of the walk in and some people use the whole of the walk in. It's a personal choice and you must decide which one is best for you and your dog. We all have our own ideas of which is the best thing to do and of course, we are all right!

## **Corners**

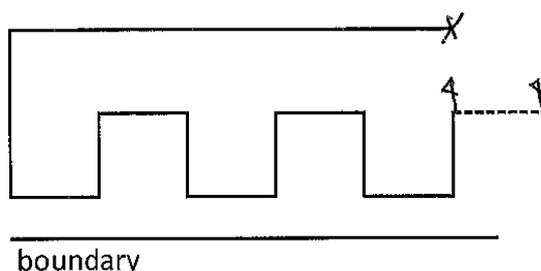
There are many different ways of teaching corners and I tend to use a combination of methods. One important thing to know is where you have laid it!

I like to teach my dog to track curves and circles when the opportunity arises, but, I only do this when the conditions are such that I can see the track, i.e. lush grass, wet crop/ grass, frost and snow. Working curves and circles teaches the dog to keep its nose on the ground and even the best track layers don't always walk in a straight line and have occasionally walked a curve, well obviously not myself or Mark! 😊. By teaching curves and circles these can be closed down to make them into corners.

Another method of teaching corners is to lay the tracks into a boundary. Only lay legs of about 25-30 yards towards a boundary, when you reach the boundary the choice of direction for the dog is limited and you know where the corner actually falls. I always scuff out of corners when I start teaching and even later when I want to train, particularly if conditions are not favourable.

Next step is to walk along the boundary another 25-30 yards make another 90 degree turn, again scuffing out the corner, until you come level with the poles, then turn again. Continue in this way, gradually increasing the number of corners and length of the track. At the end you could either finish there or make a longer track and turn to get you back to the base line. For example:

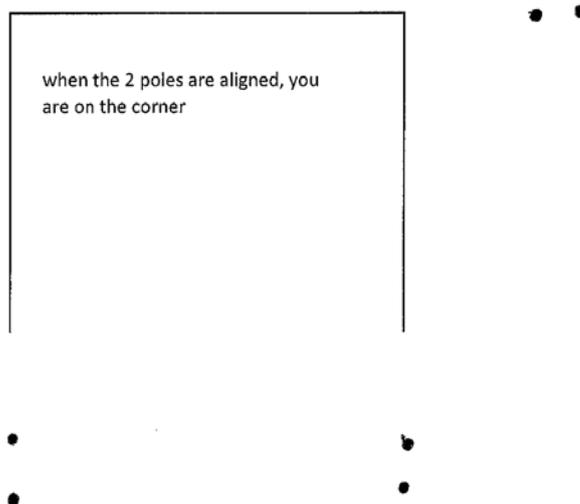
Teaching corners into boundaries  
A few articles on different facing legs, but, don't  
overload with articles, we are teaching corners



### **Knowing Your Corner**

Some people are really good at counting the amount of paces they have walked – I'm not, my laying paces never match my working paces. Sometimes conditions are good enough to be able to see, great! For those occasions when you can't see, here are a few ideas.

Plot the field with two poles aligned with your corner. Quite a lengthy process and you have to lay the poles prior to the track, but, really good when you are starting a young or inexperienced dog



Some people favour using white powder (unscented talc or flour work well) and put a spray of this prior to a corner so they know it's coming up.

Another method is to mark the corners with poles; I have found this method very good for me. While laying your track, when you reach the corner, reach across the opposite way you want to turn, i.e. if turning left, reach to the right as far as you can with your feet stationary and put a pole in the ground, pointing in the direction of the next leg. If the dog acknowledges the pole, just ignore it, they will get back to the track when there's no reward for acknowledging the pole, particularly as it's not on the track. A good method, but, you need lots of poles, plus you have to walk round afterwards and pick them all up!

Some people like to double lay corners when training. Whatever method you use, always know where your corner is so that you can be confident when your dog takes you round it.

## **TRAINING TRACKS**

Something that we are all guilty of doing is testing our dogs rather than training them. Consider how you go about tracking training with your dog, do you:

- Always lay a pattern
- Get other people to lay a pattern for you
- Age the track
- Lay complex patterns
- Lay the same pattern because that's easiest and you know it
- Allow time to train a track or fit it in quickly to get it over and done with so you can do something else

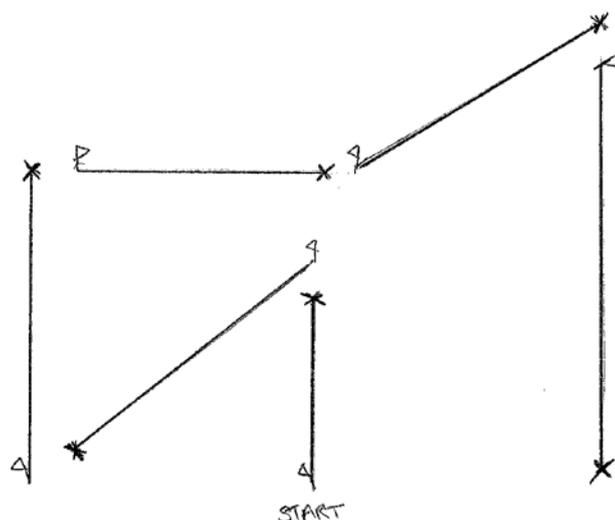
I vary the type of track I am training, and try to lay different each time I train. The track might be according to how much time I have available, if it goes wrong, do I have enough time to lay another track to remedy? Never want to end on a bad note. Does my dog need to work on articles, their stamina, corners, getting away from the pole?

These are a few ideas to consider:

### **Starter tracks**

Really useful training aid, particularly if you are short of land and time. These really are what they “say on the tin” working on the start of the track, leaving the pole! These will build confidence in your dog to take you away from the pole, even when you are not sure, teaches the dogs that you are an idiot and they must take control!

Lay a series of tracks (about 4-6), 25-30 yards long, preferably in view of the dog to build their drive and enthusiasm. From each pole walk in a different direction, when you reach the 25-30 yards place a great toy which you can have a super game with, then walk straight for another 15ish paces and put in your next pole, then turn in a different direction and lay the next track. The advantage of this is that you can see the direction you are going as there’s a pole marking the start of the next track. For example:



An important point to remember about starter tracks is not to actually go immediately with your dog when they start tracking, encourage them to dig deep into their harnesses and take you down the track, again, convince the dog that you are an idiot and they have to make the decision and drag you along. Make a point of taking the line off the dog between tracks, although it’s probably too short a time to take off the

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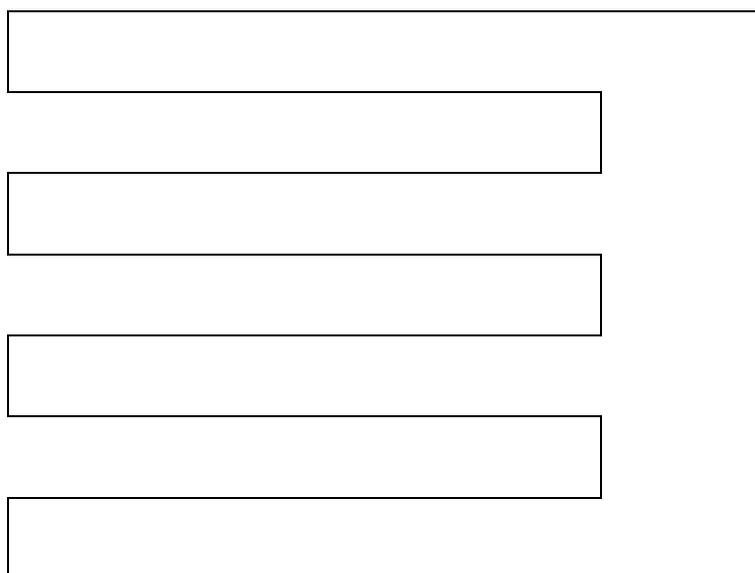
harness. Set up the next track as if it were the start of a track, continue till you reach the end.

Moving this on, you could start adding a corner, so 25-30 yards, corner and they another 25ish yards before the toy, walk another 15 yards in a straight line and put in your pole for the next starter track. One advantage to this is that there will be a pole in the direction that your track is heading, so in effect, you have marked the corner.

### **Stamina Tracks**

I use these to build concentration and stamina for my dogs. They are long, but, very simple, usually a box up and down the field, approximately 1000-1200 yards or longer. Nothing complicated, but, building up the concentration span, usually with a few articles, you'll be glad of the rest when you reach them! But, remember this is a stamina track, not an article one.

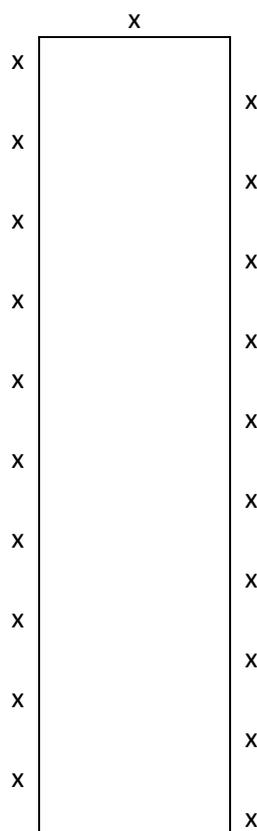
stamina tracks



### **Article Tracks**

These are also uncomplicated tracks, usually a straight line, open box or similar, with articles every 25-30 paces. The articles are usually varied in size and type and each one receives a big fuss, in fact when working article tracks, I probably spend more time fussing and playing with articles than tracking. If the dog misses an article, I don't make a big thing about it, often just picking it up myself and saying nothing, although if I think the dog has gone "track happy", I will point out to them that they

missed the article and they do not receive praise for that article, but, I go over the top with praise and encouragement when they identify the next one.



Article track, simple and loaded with articles

If your dog is not article orientated, you could try using a titbit under the article, the theory being that if you are competing, the dog has to identify the article. Flipping it over to see if there's a treat underneath is identifying the article! Better still would be to work on articles away from the tracking field and put the two together at a later stage. Make articles interesting and something the dog wants. After all, the best track in the world without articles is worthless, you won't qualify. The purpose of a track is to find the articles.

Some people like their dogs to lie down on articles, some like the dogs to deliver the articles to hand, your call. This will very much depend on your dog and their interest in articles and what you want them to do. Some dogs can become very possessive over articles, you don't want to spend half your tracking time trying to get the article off the dog, so consider training them to lie down on the article, perhaps touching it with their noses, because when you get into ticket those articles are pretty darn small and you might not be able to see them with your naked eye, the occasions when delivery to hand is desirable. Again, your choice.



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they struggle through the area you know to be fouled, break off and re-cast further along the track, put the dog on the track at a later point, avoiding the fouling. It's not a track that's lost – it's a training opportunity.

Another “training opportunity” which also in a way encompasses stamina tracks, is to track around the edge of a field. Most game will used the boundary of a field to munch their way through crop or grass, with the shelter of the hedgerow not far away, therefore, that part of the field is more contaminated than the middle of the field. Use this as a training opportunity and lay your track around the edge of the field, working through the gamey areas. However, don't forget to allow for the distraction of the game on the track, scuff the track; put more food on track or articles if your dog finds them rewarding. You will probably encounter game distraction at a trial, so train for it.

Any distractions while tracking should be considered as training opportunities. An interruption, a contamination, whatever, use it as an opportunity to work through the problem. Once when I was tracking my BC, I noticed a police man watching me over the field gate. There had been a lot of problems with travellers in the area, so on reaching an article, I stopped, took off the harness and line and went over to speak to the policeman. It turned out he was a dog handler and had never seen a BC tracking before. After a lengthy chat, I offered him the chance to complete the track with my BC and the policeman jumped at the chance. So we went back to where I had left the harness and line, “dressed” my dog again and the track was completed with a different handler and myself following along behind. Dog was happy to be tracking – didn't care who was holding the line, the policeman was happy and enjoyed his experience, I found it a really interesting experience to see my dog working from a different perspective.

## **Line Handling**

This is an art form in itself and we all have our own ideas.

I like to leave my line out behind me so I know where I've been, good for when you have acute angles that feel like a backtrack, or somewhere to walk back along if you've overshot the corner. Downside is that your line will become very muddy or wet in inclement conditions, sometimes so muddy that it becomes heavy and difficult to work.

Some people like to have their lines looped in their hand, feeding the line out and in as needed.

This really is very much a personal preference and you will find your own way of handling your line which suits you and your dog. What I can practically guarantee is that at some stage your tracking line will become a macramé project or a rod of steel! Those are the occasions that despite the dog's thousands of years of developing a sense of smell, greater than we will ever understand, we know best! Something I suspect we have all done or will do ☺

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Whatever your chosen method of holding your tracking line, you have a long line for a reason. You will establish your preferred length of line for working your dog under normal conditions. When you first get to the pole, rather than dashing off after your dog the minute it moves from the pole, feed the line out a bit so that you are confident your dog really has taken the track and is not just sniffing around and checking. Once you are confident, move off but start working in your line to your normal length. This also applies to corners, work your line, it's a team effort and you need to give your dog every opportunity possible to get it right, good line handling will get you out of all sorts of difficulties.

When I first started tracking, I had a rope line with 3 knots in it. The first was my "normal" working length, the second my "looking for a corner length" and the third the "I'm flipping lost" length!

### **Signals, Intentional or Otherwise!**

Some people think that their dogs' know what their owners are thinking, sadly dogs are not telepathic, but, superb at reading body language and we, being mere humans are superb at giving lots of body language, including unintentional signals to our dogs.

Laying our own tracks and knowing where the corners are is great, but, one drawback is that we can sometimes, unintentionally and without realising that we are doing it, give our dog a hint of where the track goes or article is located. So make sure occasionally somebody else lays you a track. That having been said, make sure they are competent at laying a track and knowing where they have been.

Approaching the corner or article, do you subconsciously start to put pressure on the line? Do you without thinking turn your feet the way it's going? I know I'm guilty of this and think we are all guilty of to a certain extent. When your dog starts to cast, do you move your feet, arms or body to the direction the leg goes? Track laying for competition has opened my eyes to the fact that just about everybody does this to a certain extent. Handlers think that they know where the track goes, will try and influence their dogs to that direction; the tracking line becomes that "rod of iron" again.

One way to try and counteract this (H & S disclaimer coming up – don't trip), is to try shutting your eyes and just feeling your dog on the line. As you approach a corner or article, about 10-15 paces, close your eyes. You will be amazed at how much you can tell what your dog is doing through that line.

Going back a few years, I had a discussion with a chiropractor who was blind. Her son, who was also blind, was having a problem with his guide dog who had taken an aversion to the harness they used. She wanted to know about tracking harnesses and how sensitive they can be, my solution – come and track my dog and feel. This we duly did and she was amazed how much you could read through the harness, not in quite the same way as a guide dog harness, but, enough to read what's going on.

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The son changed to a tracking harness, dog was happy and so was the owner and his mother.

### **Consequences of Training Aids**

Always try and consider what the consequences of any training aids that you use will be and how they might affect what you want. For example: one good friend was having trouble motivating her dog in play drive and stumbled across blowing bubbles, (the kind that children have from a tub of soap with a ring on a stick). Her reward for good work from her dog, tracking or otherwise, was to blow bubbles and her dog would chase the bubbles. Great! Apart from when we tried a steadiness to gunshot, on seeing the smoke drifting, the dog chased it the way he did the bubbles. Needless to say, she's stopped blowing bubbles!

Another friend wanted to proof her dog for the gun test and let the dog play with the gun, using it as a toy. Consequence of that – each gun test she did, the dog ran to the judge to try and get the gun – not a good idea and a few judges thought the dog was going to bite them, a dangerous game for all concerned.

**Always** think of what the consequences of any training aid you use may have in the longer term.

### **Tracking Land**

This is so hard to obtain, so if you have some, hold on to it tightly! In a perfect world we would be training on as many different surfaces as we could lay our hands on: grass, crop, plough, milled, heather, moorland and land grazed by sheep, cattle and horses to give our dogs as much exposure to as many different surfaces as possible. Reality is that we have to take what we can get and be very grateful.

If you are unlucky and don't have any access to land don't despair, we probably make more of a fuss about this than the dogs. Dogs seem to manage to track on surfaces we would never chose; indeed some can track on concrete in some instances. Barry Gilbert has successfully demonstrated tracking in the main ring of Crufts, on the green carpet, now how contaminated is that? But his dogs just take it in their stride. If you are interested, this year's footage can be found at "Crufts 2015 day 1 live" and the working trials bit is at about 5-35. Definitely worth a look.

Something I've done and suggest that even if you have perfect land you should try – tracking in the local park.

If you watch, people tend to walk around the edges of parks, rather than through the middle (of course there will be some). Try laying and working just a straight line across the local park, this is great for distraction and cross track training, although I suggest that you don't leave this to age as the pole and toy might go missing! Grass verges are also a good place, although be careful not to trespass or on a grass verge (another H & S Disclaimer here) - caution any traffic.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING**

Sometimes despite our best efforts training, things don't go quite the way we would hope. Common problems include:

### **Dog Lacking Motivation/ Commitment to Tracking**

If you find your dog is not as motivated or committed to the track as you would like, there could be a number of reasons. **YOU** need to be completely honest with yourself.

- Have you been pushing your dog too far?
- Have the tracks been complicated or on difficult surfaces?
- Have you been questioning the dog too much so dog has lost confidence?
- Have you allowed for contamination of track with extra food/ rewards?
- Are the rewards for tracking sufficient for the dog?
- Are you overtraining, so dog is becoming a little "bored" with the exercise?
- Have you fallen into testing your dog rather than training?
- Are you training tracks well-constructed, ie for different aspects of a track, stamina, starts, articles, corners, distractions?
- Have you been just following your dog rather than reading its body language to make sure it's really tracking? What I am getting at here, does the dog really understand the exercise or are you simply wandering along behind in roughly the direction you laid the track?

If you can answer yes to any of these, you probably already know what you must do .... go back a few stages. Make rewards huge and the whole thing fun – fun for the dog that is! Try starter tracks to rebuild motivation or continue to keep the dog motivated, make things easy so their confidence and enthusiasm builds.

### **Not Confident Leaving the Pole/ Taking the Handler Forward on the Track/ Corner**

Have you been checking the dog too much, questioning their tracking? If you can help at trials you will see this one a lot. The dog indicates the direction of the track but the handler has their own idea of where it goes. Dog will try and take handler, but, handler puts the brakes on and doesn't follow. Do this a few times and the dog will lose confidence. The dog may then wander off in the wrong direction, just to keep the handler happy. The handler now happy that the dog is going the way they think the track goes follows. Result – you are "blown" off the track and fail, but worse still a confused dog that could be losing its confidence.

### **Overshooting Corners**

If you have a fast or inexperienced tracking dog you may find they overshoot corners, thinking time from brain to legs! This does often correct itself once the dog

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becomes more proficient/ experienced and tracks become harder. Easy tracks mean that the dogs do not have to concentrate as much, so their heads come up and they are past the corner before they get their heads back in gear.

However, one way of training against this or to try and remedy the situation is not to lay corners, but, curves. Lay a normal pattern but, just like teaching corners earlier in this document, curve the corners.

Tracking on slightly more difficult terrain (short grass) or aging the track will slow your dog down and help with this one.

### **Casting on Corners/ Track**

Casting is not a desirable action, but, something that dogs will do on occasions. I mentioned earlier about dogs being left and right handed, on reaching a corner you might find your dog casts when the track goes right, but, not when it goes left or vice versa. They are favouring their left or right handedness. Do try not to let your dog complete a circle around you (a complete cast). If they reach the leg you have just come up, try to get them round in front of you to the other side without going behind you. By going behind you, the dog may find the leg you've just done and try to re-do that, also, as a bit of gamesmanship here, I know some judges that will mark a complete cast around the handler, but, not if the dog goes from one side to the other.

Dogs may sometimes cast for no apparent reason in the middle of a leg. This is a hard one to try and cure as they may be casting on animal tracks crossing the track you want the dog to follow. I've tracked in the snow and was amazed by how many animal prints I could see. My dog (Banjo) was also quite amazed when she stopped to check the bunny footprints and was reprimanded for doing so, I could almost see her saying "but I always do and you never usually say anything!"

Build up your dog's concentration and if you are 100% sure that your dog is messing around, that they fully understand what they are doing, try a little "oi!" and get them back to the track. Another reason for casting is if there is a change in the terrain, across tractor lines, from short to long crop/ grass/ moorland etc. Make sure that you include terrain changes into your training.

Above all, if you dog lifts its head from the track, STOP! Don't paddle about or follow until the head is back down and you can be sure its concentrating on the track.

### **Picking Up Historic/ The Wrong Track**

In competition you may find yourself working on the third or fourth day and the fields will have been used on each day. A good tracklayer should be rotating and offsetting the tracks to try and give each dog the best opportunity possible, but, it will still mean that sometimes the dog will pick up the wrong track. This is really difficult when the tracklayer is the same person for each day, the tracklayer may have walked the same track and turned in a different place and sometime you will have to

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“take it on the chin” in competition. BUT, make sure your training covers this event, do cross tracking in your training. Track across fouled land as mentioned previously.

### **Not Identifying Articles**

This has already been partially covered earlier, but .... there are some people that teach the search square first, building up the dog's article drive. Articles must be made valuable to the dogs, try working on this away from the track and ensure that every article that is recovered on the track gets a great deal of attention and made worthwhile for your dog.

## **So enough theory, lets track on!**

*Sandra*