



## **Track Laying Skills**

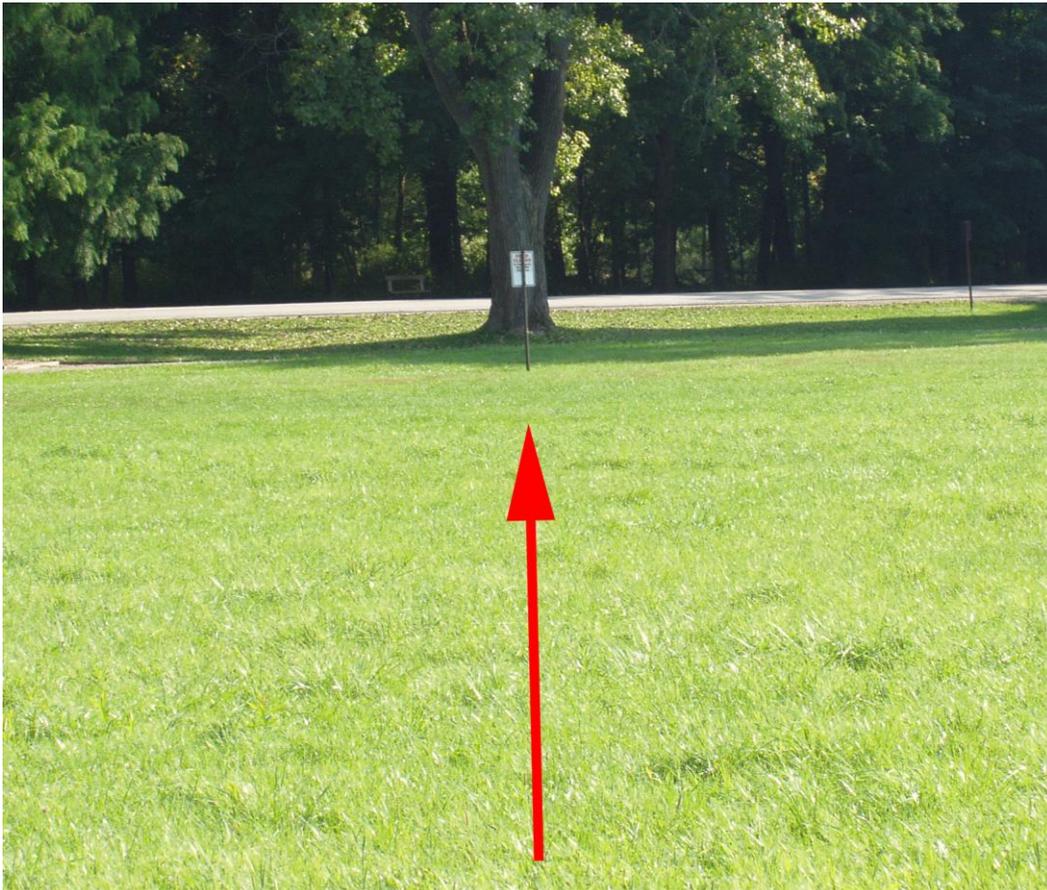
**By Rosemary Janoch**

There are several reasons to develop good track laying skills. If you have ever put in a blind track for someone, you certainly know how important it is to have these skills. A blind track has no flags, clothespins, or other markers to indicate where the legs are or to pinpoint the turns. A blind track is the type of track you run at a tracking test. There are two start flags and nothing else, or, in the case of an advanced tracking test, one start flag and nothing else.

You need to develop good tracking laying skills so you can effectively help your dog during a training session. In order to help your dog, you must know precisely where the track is located. Since losing a favorite article is no fun, either, you have still another reason to always know exactly where the track goes.

When you become really comfortable with laying track, I suggest that you use your track laying skills to volunteer at a local tracking test. Clubs are always looking for workers so this will certainly make you a very popular individual. On a more personal level, though, there is no greater thrill than watching a hard-working team pass on a track that you put in, unless you count watching your own dog pass a test!

Although several track laying skills are needed, walking in a straight line is one of the most important ones to master. Most of us don't normally walk in a straight line. Have you ever heard of someone being lost in the woods and walking around in circles? In actuality, that is what most of us would do. Generally, we have one leg just slightly shorter than the other, or we favor one leg a little because of a bad knee. Whatever the reason, very few of us naturally walk in a straight line. Consequently, we need help. Lining up two objects in the distance will keep most of us walking in a straight line. For example, keep two telephone poles lined up with one exactly behind the other. If the pole in the back appears, you have changed course. Realign the two poles so the one is hidden, and you will once again be walking in a straight line.



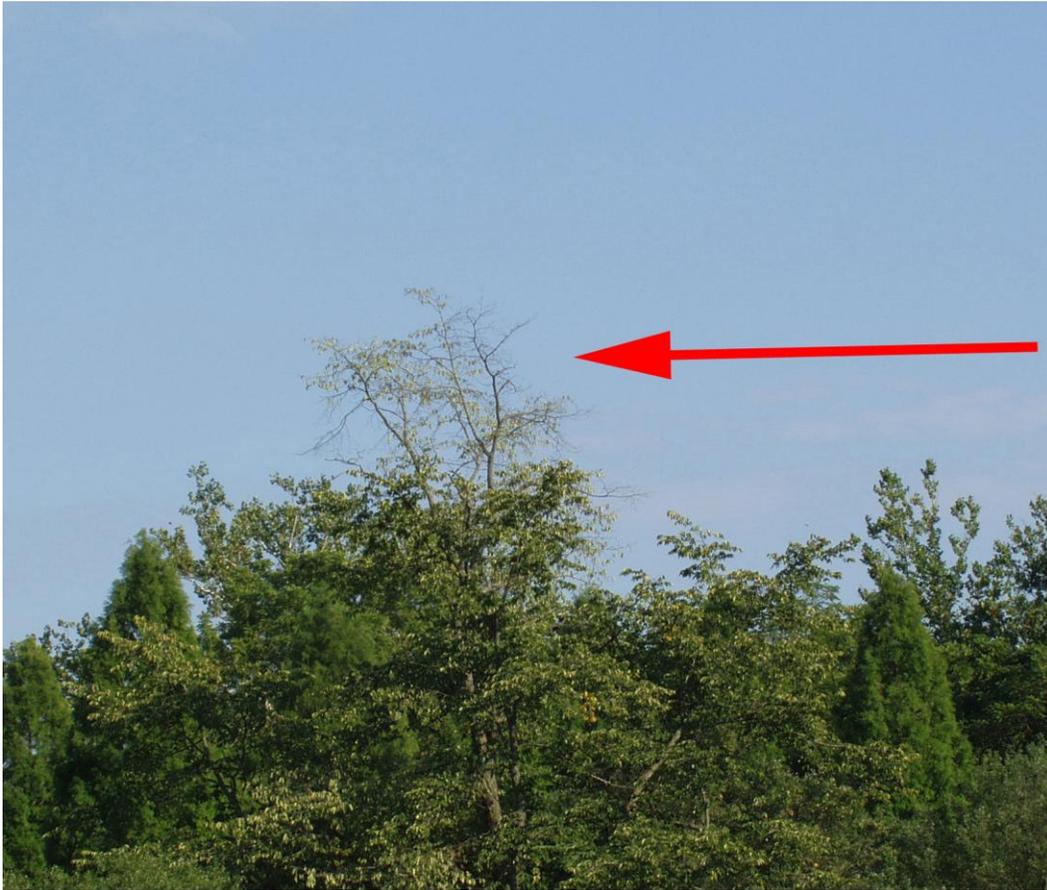
Keeping the sign centered on the tree trunk will help you walk a straight line. If the sign shifts to the right or left of the tree, you must realign it to get back on a straight line.

The two objects you line up do not have to be identical, like the two telephone poles. You can line up a telephone pole with a fence post or a small bush. You can line up a sign directly in the center of a tree trunk . The idea is simply to place one object behind another object to help you walk in a straight line.



Tree lines are not generally uniform. A tree taller than the rest, or a dip in the tree line like in this photo, can give you something to aim at while walking.

If you cannot see anything in the distance that is distinctive, be systematic in how you look at what is in front of you. If you are looking at woods and all the trees look the same to you, start looking at the tree tops. Look for a dip in the outline



A tree line can have a funny branch that is far different from anything around it. Look for foliage that catches your eye and is easily remembered.

, a tree that stands taller than the others, or a funny shape that you will remember . If you see nothing at the top of the trees, lower your eyes and look into the trees. Is there a distinctive gap between two trees, a bare tree or branch that is very noticeable, or a bird's nest?



This bare tree is hard to miss and so it makes an excellent field marker that can be readily found while running a dog.

If you still see nothing distinctive, look at the base of the trees. Try to find a bush there, a distinctive tree trunk ,



The red arrow is pointing to the base of a tree that has a unique V shape which makes it different from the surrounding trees. This would be an easy tree to find later.

a fallen branch, or a log on the ground to aim at as you walk. Whatever it is that you find, it must be unique enough that you are certain you can find it again in 30 minutes, or three hours, when you return to run a dog on the track.



Although the trees in this photo all intertwine and are difficult to tell apart, the fallen log is distinctive.



These two tall tufts of grass are in the sun now, but may be hidden in shadow in as little as 10 minutes. Don't rely on field markers that are distinctive only because they are in the sun.

Be wary of relying on colors and shadows to help you walk in a straight line. Colors and shadows can change in a matter of minutes, so unless you are going to run the track immediately, avoid using them as field markers. Also be cautious of flowering plants if you plot the track early in the morning and don't plan on running it until much later. That single yellow flower that is sitting out in the middle of the field all by itself and which seems like such a perfect field marker might be joined by 30 or 40 other yellow flowers when you return hours later to run the track.

Another necessary track laying skill is knowledge of yardage walked. Too many trackers overestimate their yardage. I have had individuals come to me for certification and tell me that my track was the longest one they had ever run. Often, that is because my 475 yard track is a lot longer than *their* 475 yard track.

To get an idea of how many steps you need to walk to go 100 yards, drive to your local high school on a Sunday afternoon and count your steps as you walk along the edge of the football field. Now turn around and count again as you walk back. Did you count the same number of paces in both directions? If not, take an average of the two and this would be a fair estimate of how many steps, or paces, you need to walk to cover 100 yards in mowed grass. If you can find some higher vegetation nearby where you can walk parallel to the football field, count your paces there and you will see that it takes you more steps to cover the same distance when the cover is high. If you cannot find any higher cover near the football field, try borrowing a range finder from a friend (a golfing fanatic would be likely to have one) and go out to your usual tracking field. Have your friend stand still, and you walk out to what you believe is 100 yards in the cover. Have your friend use the range

finder to tell you how far you actually are from where you started. Often, trackers find they are significantly short of the 100 yards they thought they walked.

The problem with walking too short a track compounds itself when you move on to doing TDX tracks. Let's say for instance, that your 100 yard leg is, in fact, only 85 yards. When you put in an 800 yard training track for your dog, he is actually only doing 680 yards because of your short yardage count. Let's imagine that he is successful with that track, though, and so you decide to enter him in a TDX test. You enter a test where the judges put in a 980 yard TDX track. Remember, however, that your dog is only comfortable doing 680 yards. Where is he supposed to find the extra stamina and motivation to finish the last 300 yards of that 980 yard track?

You should devise a method for keeping track of your yardage as you lay the track. Some folks write the yardage down leg by leg on their maps. I tend to not care how long each leg is as long as the overall track has 300 yards or 800 yards or whatever the total length of track is that I want to have for that day. I use brightly colored clothespins to mark my track through woods and high cover, and I will take one of those clothespins and attach it to the strap of my tracking bag for each 100 yards I walk. If I want an 800 yard track today and I have been walking for some time, I simply count how many clothespins are on my bag. If there are only six of them, I know I need to walk another 200 yards before I drop the last article.

If you don't like writing the yardage down on a piece of paper, and you don't like the idea of clipping clothespins to your jacket, come up with some other way to keep a record of how far you have walked. As a judge, I have learned to jot down the yardage the moment I stop in the field on plotting day. Do not talk to anyone, ask a question, answer a question, or confer with the other judge about the track's configuration, until you have written down your count. It will save you a lot of frustration when you find out you can't discuss something and remember your count at the same time.

Being able to make a 90 degree turn is another worthwhile skill, although I do not consider it to be as important as the first two skills of walking a straight line and knowing your yardage. Your dog must do 90 degree turns in a tracking test, however, so it is good to practice them on a regular basis. I have seen individuals use compasses, mirrors, edges of notebooks, and outstretched arms to decide what constitutes a 90 degree turn. Whatever works for you is fine, but get another tracker's opinion from time to time to be sure you are making an honest turn.

The reason I don't feel this skill is terribly important is because I expose my dog to all sorts of turns. I regularly plot tracks with open turns, right turns, and acute turns. If my dog can do all types of turns, then there is no need to focus specifically on 90 degree turns when I am preparing to enter a test.

What I consider to be far more important is to know exactly where my turns are located. I like to be able to spot a turn from a distance. I do not like to have to be directly on the turn to see the little blue flower or the gray flat stone that I used for a turn marker. I cannot learn to read a new dog's "loss of track" indication if I cannot tell where the turn is before the dog gets to it. That is why I like to see a turn marker from a distance. I use distinctive bushes, ground cover changes, tall weeds, or a unique clump of grass easily seen from 20-30 yards away as markers.



The small dark clump of grass would make a good target to walk toward from a distance and would make a good turn marker as well.

Too many inexperienced trackers decide how long a leg will be before they walk it. They decide they want a 100 yard leg, and they turn at 100 yards no matter what is there at the turn. I prefer to approximate the length of the leg and let the field tell me when to turn. For example, if I want the leg to be about 100 yards long, I will start looking for a distinctive turn marker at around 50-60 yards. If I see a large clump of Queen Anne Lace placed directly ahead of me, that is where I will make my turn. The leg might end up being only 87 yards long, or it might be 109 yards long. I don't let the yardage get in the way of my finding good field markers and knowing exactly where my track is at all times.

If the turn marker you decide to use is a bush or a tree, I would not recommend turning precisely there. I would turn a little after it to prevent the dog from tangling the lead around the turn marker as he casts for the new direction of the track.

You also need to be aware of scenting conditions at a turn. Turning in a swale just because you know you will be able to find the turn might not be such a good idea if your dog has to struggle to find the new direction of the track. By all means, turn in a swale, or in a patch of mint for that matter, if that is the lesson you want to teach your dog today, but don't turn there just because it is a location you will remember. Be sure the objective for the day is clear in your mind before you lay the track.



Inexperienced track layers find it easy to use man made markers like the telephone pole, fence posts, and stop signs in this photo. Develop your ability to use natural markers, however, so that you can plot tracks in remote areas with ease.

I realize that many individuals find it easier to put in tracks when man-made objects are nearby and can be readily used as markers. Telephone poles, street signs, and traffic signs can all be used to help walk a track . As you gain experience, however, you will become more comfortable with laying tracks in less developed areas. Mother Nature provides a plethora of field markers if you just take the time to look around.

If you consistently put your flags on your left side, consider using natural markers in the field as substitute flags. You can often find three or four natural markers like bushes or tall weeds that more or less line up in a row for you. Walk a leg of your track keeping those markers on your left side as you pass them just as you would if they were flags. You don't have to put artificial markers like clips or flags on the track then, which sometime distract dogs, if you have natural markers acting like flags. In the case of a blind track, where you are not using any artificial markers at all, natural markers that line up in a row make it very easy to tell whether or not the dog is on the track.

If I am approaching something like a bush or tree that I must go around, I try to be consistent throughout the track on which side I will walk. If I always walk on the left side, then when the dog approaches the object hours later I don't have to wonder which side I went on. I know it was the left. The next time I lay a track for that dog, I will be sure to go to the right of everything so that the dog does not learn to simply go to the left of obstructions. The point I am trying to make is that you can eliminate the guess work and make tracks easier to remember out in the field with just a little prior planning.

If you know the field is filled with thorn bushes or thistles plan a route around the worst of them rather than right through them. If you use the same fields over and over again, you will soon learn the places to avoid, and the easiest paths to follow. I am not suggesting, however, that you avoid every little bit of “tough going” that is out there. You want to expose even young dogs to a physical challenge from time to time so that they don’t quit when faced with some nasty cover at a test. Judges do not intentionally take handlers and dogs through raspberry bushes, but sometimes there is just no other way to get from here to there except through those bushes, so be prepared and have a dog that is willing to go where the track leads.

To avoid problems when laying tracks, I would suggest you plan how you will enter the field and how you will exit it before you take one step onto the field. If you are planning on a TDX track for your dog, also plan how the cross track layers will get in and out before you begin walking. Pay attention to the wood line. Is it coming in toward you on one side? That might leave you with too little space to finish your track. Perhaps you need to start the track on that side and finish it on the other.

The final skill you need is, of course, to remember where you dropped the glove. This is especially important if you are laying a blind track for another handler and the dog fails. Your track laying skills will come back to haunt you if they are weak, so be sure you know where you are on the track at all times, and especially know where you dropped the glove.

For those rare occasions when the glove is missing, remember to carry a spare article with you and drop it for the dog so that he gets a reward for all his hard work. Some little animal is probably sleeping nice and warm in their den on top of your glove. Expect random set backs like this from time to time when you lay track.

If you are not yet totally comfortable laying blind tracks, I would suggest that you do the following exercise. Lay a blind track without using any artificial markers. This is strictly a track for you, so do not run a dog on it. Drop a golf ball, or some other small object that you wouldn’t mind losing if you can’t find it later, on each corner of the track and drop a glove at the end. After several hours, use your map and your track laying skills to walk the track to find each of the golf balls and the glove. This track laying exercise will give you practice in laying blind tracks and, if you are successful in finding all the dropped objects, will give you the confidence to lay a blind track for a friend. Yes, you will look a little weird out there walking around by yourself, but we trackers are a weird bunch anyway. None of us will laugh at you. We’ve all been there ourselves.