



Tracking With Seniors Part One

By Rosemary Janoch

Tracking is a sport that can be enjoyed by dogs and handlers of all ages. In Part One of this article, I want to address some considerations you should keep in mind if you are tracking with an older dog. In Part Two, I will discuss pointers for handlers who are the "senior" half of the tracking team.

It is not uncommon for dogs to be introduced to the sport of tracking late in their careers. Often dogs have finished titles in obedience, agility, and other venues as younger dogs, and now their handlers are looking for something else to do with an older dog that is still healthy and active, but perhaps is no longer up to the rigors of a fast, vigorous activity. Tracking is a logical choice.

There is no time limit at a tracking test. Although many dogs successfully complete a TD track in 4-5 minutes, there are other dogs that require 20-30 minutes to find the glove. As long as

the dog continues to work the track, the judges will allow as much time as necessary for the dog to complete his task. This lack of a time limit is one of the many reasons handlers like tracking with an older dog.

Other reasons include the fact that tracking is a non-competitive sport. Since it is pass/fail, there are no scores given and no placements awarded. Tracking allows the senior dog to remain physically active and mentally challenged. It allows the handler/dog team to continue to enjoy each other's company and camaraderie long after "competition" days are over. It allows an already accomplished dog to prove his versatility by earning another title in a totally different field of endeavor.

If you are planning on tracking with a senior dog, however, there are several considerations you need to keep in mind. It is very likely, for instance, that you will not get the strong "pull" into the harness that a young dog might give you. This means that you will have to be astute at reading your dog's body language. His body language will probably communicate more to you than the feel of the tracking line will. Without the strong pull of a young dog, you may also find that a heavy tracking lead is unnecessary. A lighter lead will adequately serve the purpose. Although harnesses padded with fleece are most often used with breeds that have very little coat, if you think it will add to the comfort of your coated senior dog you should consider purchasing one. If you are handy with a sewing machine, you might even consider padding one of your own harnesses with fleece from a local fabric store.

Although a senior dog typically tracks slower than a young dog, he still must be conditioned so he can physically handle the job. Condition the dog with long walks, not long tracks. I would encourage you to condition the dog on non-tracking days with walks that are brisk and at least one or two miles in length. Work up to that distance if your dog cannot handle that length currently. If you are planning on earning a TDX title with your senior dog, a three or four mile walk several times a week would be appropriate.

Just as our senses are less acute as we age, so it is with dogs. Hearing loss in an older dog is probably something we have all noticed. What is harder to notice, but is unfortunately true, is that a dog's ability to smell also becomes less keen with age. Please do not misunderstand me, an older dog is perfectly able to track. An old dog's ability to smell greatly exceeds our own, and is still a formidable sense. What I want you to be aware of, however, is that a situation that might not cause a young dog much difficulty (a swale for example) might be more difficult for an older dog to scent his way through. Patience is the key. If the dog is doing the best that he can, give an adequate amount of time for him to sort through the problem.

If your older dog is reluctant to retrieve the glove, or in the case of TDX, is reluctant to retrieve any of the various articles found on the track, check to see if there is a physical problem with his mouth or teeth before you jump to the conclusion that you have a training issue. Your article problem might be solved with the simple extraction of a bad tooth.

Train components of a track more frequently than you train full tracks. Do a few practice starts, and then call it a day. Work on a couple of turns the next time you track, and then go home. Don't try to put too much length or too much age on a single track. Keep in mind that even though you are only training components of a track, you may still have to train your senior dog less often to keep his motivation high.

Be more aware of heat and cold. Consider not tracking on days that are extremely hot or cold as older dogs do not handle temperature extremes as well as they used to when they were young. Check for signs that the dog might be over exerting himself, and put a stop to the activity before any damage is done. Give water frequently.

After tracking, inspect your dog for burrs, ticks, or any other grooming concerns before you take him home. Carry a doggie first aid kit in your car and be sure it is well equipped. In particular, I would suggest you have a saline rinsing solution in case your dog has gotten a seed or two in his eye and the eye needs to be flushed. I like to have Benadryl on hand in case my dog or I step on a yellow jacket nest while tracking. You want to help alleviate the effects of a sting, or multiple stings, as quickly as possible.

Be aware that tracking over logs and through deep gullies might be very difficult for an arthritic dog. Use your common sense when deciding on how challenging to make a track for a dog with arthritis. Ask your vet if any medication your dog is taking will effect his ability to smell and adjust your expectations accordingly.

One of the pitfalls of tracking an older dog is that we often think the dog knows more than he does. Just because your dog was a whiz in his previous activities doesn't mean he knows what he's doing now. If, however, you have a strong foundation for learning with your dog, and over the many years together you have learned to read his body language well, you will find that teaching him to track will be relatively easy.

Motivation, as always, is the key. If you know what motivates your dog, you are home free. If you don't know what motivates him, find out. You may discover that while food motivated him in his obedience work, and a tennis ball motivated him in agility, you must now use a pink elephant with a squeaker in its trunk to motivate your dog to track. Be flexible. A new activity sometimes requires a new motivator.

When you go tracking with him, don't bring along all the young dogs who will be barking and fussing in the car anxiously awaiting their turn. Let this be a special time for just you and your old timer. Start slowly and patiently, and you may discover that tracking is exactly the activity that you and your senior dog have been looking for.