



Intro to Tracking

Tracking is a wonderful sport that all dogs of all ages and abilities can participate in, either for fun or for competition. This course is designed for teams with little to no tracking experience.

We will follow the AKC tracking guidelines in this course. There are many other organizations that have tracking included in their programs, and many are very similar, however we will focus on just the AKC regulations to start with.

This class will run for six weeks and we will be working indoors and outdoors to learn and develop the skills to become an amazing tracking team. Please plan on dressing accordingly, and of course, if the weather is too severe we will reschedule the class for the following week. Don't forget bug spray and sunscreen too!

Some of the topics we will cover are:

- Suggested equipment
- Types of tracking surfaces
- Creating a scent pad
- Leash/long line handling skills
- How to lay a track and how to age your track
- Article placement, indications, and commitment to the find
- How the wind can help (and derail) your searches
- Laying & training corners (turns)
- Introducing common variables and dealing with distractions
- Planning, laying & completing a track from start to finish

The Basics

The thing I love about tracking is how versatile and easy it can be to set up a track for your pup and do a quick training session. Behaviors become stronger with repetition!

The best places to lay practice tracks as a new team are quiet, open, and low-traffic areas with shorter ground cover. Mowed areas are a great early training choice. Areas with minimal human/animal disturbance and no obstacles will help you and your dog in the beginning training phase.

Early mornings and weekends are ideal to avoid foot traffic and heat as the day progresses. As your skills improve as a team you can add in variable surfaces/terrain to keep it fun and challenging for your pup.

Avoid laying tracks in your properties common areas (areas the dog has frequent access to) to keep the dog from becoming confused about the goal.

What is Tracking?

Tracking with a dog is a great team exercise, and using a trained dog to follow a scent trail greatly increases the chances of finding your target. It involves training dogs to use their nose to follow a human trail or locate objects.

The sport of tracking offers many different types of tracking, depending on what appeals to you the most. It is noteworthy that AKC requires a tracking team to be certified before entering a tracking test. This must be done by an approved AKC judge and this certification is good for two years, meaning you will have to continue to train and build your title or retest if it is not used. It is structured like a trial and is the equivalent to a TD test, no food or toys allowed.

- AKC Tracking: dogs follow a specifically aged scent trail left by a human
 - Tracking Dog (TD): 440–500 yards with 3-5 direction changes.

- Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX): 800–1000 yards with 5-7 turns.
- Variable Surface Tracking (VST): Focuses on urban environments with different surfaces.
- Military/Police Tracking
 - Foot Step Tracking (FST): precise tracking used in police work, the dog is trained to follow the actual path
- Search and Rescue (SAR): live person
 - Airscenting: dogs work off-leash, locating human scent in the air rather than on the ground
 - Trailing/Tracking: similar to police tracking, the dog is following the ground scent trail of a missing or wanted person
 - Avalanche Dogs: trained to detect human scent through snow
 - Disaster Search Dogs (DSAR) : used to clear rubble, buildings, accident sites and recover human remains
 - These dogs can also be categorized as Urban Search And Rescue (USAR)
- Search and Rescue (SAR): cadaver dogs
 - The dog is trained to find and alert to human remains and/or blood of a deceased individual
 - Can be deployed to disaster sites after SAR teams have cleared the living
- Non-competitive tracking for fun and enrichment

The Dog's Role

The tracking dog has a very big list of tasks to accomplish to reach the goal of finding the target object. They need to learn to follow a scent while ignoring other odors, stay focused on the track and correctly identify and alert to articles placed on the track. The dog is born knowing how to follow a scent, they do not know how to follow a scent on lead and convey to you there they have found something.

They have to learn to navigate a multitude of environments, surfaces, weather conditions, read the wind, and navigate changes in direction by the track layer as well as intentionally placed distractions and natural environmental distractions.

All behavior is built using repetition and reward. The initial laid tracks will have food and articles dropped along the track to teach the dog to follow the path of crushed vegetation and disturbed earth while they are self-rewarding by following the treat trail. By creating a learning opportunity that pairs food with the odor of the crushed vegetation we are creating a very important cue for the dog. Crushed vegetation means reward. Articles on the track mean reward. The odor of crushed vegetation will move to the top of the list for things that bring them joy. Add in the repetition of the behavior and before you know it you're a tracking team!

The Handler's Role

Your role in this team sport is to set your dog up for success. You are the track layer, the weatherman, the safety monitor, treat dispenser, personal trainer, and chauffeur. You will be doing the bulk of the preparation and work and then your dog will step in and work the track. If you cut corners or rush your track laying you are not setting your dog up for success. We will start with very clear criteria, lots of articles for self-rewarding on, and short tracks laid in a straight line.

I keep all the materials I need to set a track in the car. It is nice to be able to park, set a track, then work the dog as it really only takes about fifteen minutes from start to finish. You will find if you have the materials with you you'll be more likely to practice more.

Before I set a track I always scan for hazards, other dogs, distractions, wind direction, and terrain conditions.

Suggested Equipment

To get you started I have provided you with a basic kit containing articles and flags for laying a short track. You will also need to gather a few other items.

- Long line- I prefer Biothane as it is water and odor resistant, easy to clean, retains its shape and is very lightweight. To be very specific, if I have a choice I like the round Biothane (sometimes referred to as beta covered rope or biothane rope). The length of the line can be shorter (20' is acceptable) when you first start training, but eventually you are going to want to get comfortable with handling a 40' line. Choose hardware that is stainless steel or brass to avoid rust. NO FLEXI-LEADS AT ANY TIME! If your dog is a strong puller you might want to wear light gloves when tracking to protect your hands from blisters.

- Harness- The harness serves several purposes. It takes the pressure off of the dog's neck as they lean forward to follow the track. It also serves as a cue to the dog about what they are about to do. I use a specific harness for tracking as I have another type for scent work and another type for obedience. The AKC regulations state "the harness will be constructed of straps of plain pliable material and will be designed so that there is minimal restriction of the dog's movement." This means that harnesses advertised as "no pull" should not be used. I use a washable canvas harness as often it gets wet and muddy from the field. They also make biothane harnesses as well which are quite lovely. I add ID tags to the harness as I remove their collar when tracking and if there is an equipment malfunction such as a leash breaking I want a way for someone to contact me if they find my dog.
 - Link to harness type: <https://a.co/d/049v0HX2>

FROM THE AKC REGULATIONS: Section 14. Leash, Harness, and Distance Between Handler and Dog. The leash will be between twenty (20) and forty (40) feet in length. The leash will be attached to the dog's harness while tracking. The dog must wear a harness while tracking. The harness will be constructed of pliable material and will be designed so that there is minimum restriction of the dog's movement. An inconspicuous marking is permitted on the harness to identify the dog in case of loss. If a collar is worn by the dog while tracking, the collar must meet the requirements of Chapter 2, Section 17 (Collars), of the Obedience Regulations. However, required licenses or rabies tags may be attached to the collar. The leash must show on top of the harness while tracking, and it must not be deliberately run through the underside of the dog, controlling or restricting the dog's movement. The handler will follow the dog at a distance of no less than twenty (20) feet, except during the TDU or VST test where the handler may follow the dog at a distance of no less than ten (10) feet.

- Articles- when it comes to choosing tracking articles you've got a lot of variety to choose from. Socks, gloves, wallets, sponges, key chains, carpet squares, leather squares, pieces of clothing, bandanas, plastic lids, etc. There really is a tremendous amount of variety when it comes to articles. Make sure they are non-toxic, not something small enough to be ingested easily, sturdy enough to withstand damp grass and manipulation by the dog in case they pick it up, and not so large it impedes your track. Something about the size of your hand. I keep a variety in my car with my tracking flags and rotate them as needed.
- Tracking flags- the flags used in tracking are just wire with a plastic square mounted on the top part. You see them everywhere utilities are marked and are available for purchase from hardware stores or Amazon. Please do not stop along a road and pick up flags that have been placed by a utility company!
 - Link to flags: <https://a.co/d/0g5jU7Fo>
- Tracking treats- the treats I use for laying a track are high value treats like hot dogs, cheese, and chicken. I also keep some FreshPet dog food in the fridge when I don't have time to cut up treats as it is already packaged in small balls and is something my dogs love.
 - Keep in mind when the weather is warmer the food laid in tracks will attract bugs, especially ants. Many dogs will not eat a treat covered in bugs. If you live in an area where there are fire ants please make sure to avoid their nests when laying your track. Freezing your food prior to track laying also makes it less enticing for bugs, as well as tracking in the early morning when it is cooler.
- Vehicle set up- you are going to need a crate in your car if you plan to track in warm weather to avoid overheating your dog. Your dog will have to wait in the car while you lay track so keeping them contained is going to have to be part of your training plan. If your dog is not crate trained it is advisable to start playing crate games with them to make the crate fun and safe. A dog running loose when people are laying tracks ruins the track itself, leaves your dog vulnerable to hazards, and if other dogs are working a track you risk a dog fight as food is involved.
- Tug toy- I tug with my pups after they finish an exercise. It's something they find very rewarding, it releases dopamine, and it signals the track is complete.
- I also keep a few other items in the car all the time
 - Rechargeable crate fan
 - Water dish and water
 - Brush/comb to remove burs
 - Microfiber towel to rub the dog down with and pick up burs and ticks
 - Snacks for myself and my dog
 - Training log to record sessions

- First aid kit with supplies for humans and pups
- Bug spray and sunscreen
- Copy of all my dogs current vet records
- Flashlight
- Small tupperware container with water and towel to wash my dogs feet when needed

Top Locations for Tracking Practice

The beauty of tracking is while you do need a bit of space and safe conditions, there are so many potential areas available. Keep this in mind, a beautiful field that screams to have a track laid on it is owned by someone. Make sure if it is not a publicly owned property that you are not trespassing. Many land owners are happy to allow their fields to be used if you are polite enough to ask, but I assure you there is no quicker way to make them angry than trespassing on private property with a dog.

Areas I commonly use for training are listed below. And again, make sure you have permission to use the land, and always make sure to be courteous and clean up after your dog.

- Athletic fields/soccer fields: vegetation is usually short green grass that holds scent well
- Fields/pastures: usually very wide open areas with minimal activity or human traffic so ground disturbance scent is very available
 - Safety note: make sure there is no livestock kept in the pasture, many large farm animals do not like dogs!
 - Many farms utilize farm or guardian dogs for livestock protection, make sure to verify there are none in the pasture
- School grounds (weekends): mix of grass, concrete, and blacktop for varied surface training
- Hay fields: if there is no active crop growing in the field these provide a great area for advanced tracking

Laying A Track

When laying a track you are going to create an area of concentrated scent, known as a scent pad. This is achieved by trampling the vegetation at the start area in about a 2' x 2' square. Then food is placed in the scent pad on top of an article. A flag is placed in the ground to mark the starting area.

We start with a simple straight line track about 30' to 40' long. Choose a flat(ish) area with very low ground cover such as mowed grass or a short fallow field.

Eventually your dog will track in a variety of terrains. And they will do it well. But we have to teach the dog the basics in order to get to that point. Dogs like short cuts when at all possible. They don't want to work any harder than they need to. Early training foundations ensure the dog is using their nose and not their eyes. If we start them out in tall grass they will see the obvious parted and pushed down trail and follow it. We want to start them with their nose on the ground taking in odor. If they can't see it, they will get their nose on the ground to follow the track.

Initially you will be laying your own tracks. This allows you flexibility in your training, helps your dog by searching for their favorite human's scent, and builds a strong bond with your dog. As you two become a strong team you will have others lay tracks for you as well as start aging the tracks to further your dogs skills. So let's start with laying a track.



If you would like to review the AKC tracking regulations you can do that with this link:

<https://images.akc.org/pdf/rulebooks/RU9999.pdf>

If you would like to review the FEMA guidelines for SAR dogs you can do that with this link:

<https://www.fema.gov/urban-search-rescue-training>

Laying Your First Track

- Create a Scent Pad: find an area that is flat with no brush, tall grass, big rocks, or obstacles. You will need about a 20' to 40' straight run. Take three or four large steps to get to the point where you want to place your scent pad. Make sure before you get there you have flags, articles, and treats on you. You do not want to step off the scent pad to go get those objects. Think clean approach and clean exit.

- Tramp down the grass: after your large steps to reach the scent pad start by tramping down the grass in about a 2' x 2' square. Remember the goal is to teach the dog to pair crushed vegetation with treats.
- In the scent pad place one article and put some of your high value treats on top of it, as well as place a flag to the right or the left of the pad.
 - Look straight ahead at the horizon and pick two objects that line up with each other. This will help you keep your track line straight. If the objects are no longer in line with each other you are drifting off course.
 - Make sure that you place the flag always on the same side of your track. Many track layers place the flag on the left. Being consistent with this step ensures that when you come back to the track you know where it has been laid.
 - Set the track by walking backward about five steps tramping the vegetation to leave scent leading to the scent pad to help the dog ready themselves for the track.
- Creating the track: step off the scent pads edge and start shuffling your feet to crush the vegetation.
 - Keep your horizon objects in view every few steps.
 - Every two steps you will drop a treat on the article in the center of the path.
 - Think heavy feet, you want the track to be crushed down to help the dog.
- Place the articles: as you move off the scent pad and start creating your path, every two steps place an article on the path and put a few treats on top of it.
- Make your first set of tracks about 20' to 40' long (bigger dog = longer track).
- When you reach the end of your track, tramp another scent pad, place another flag, and leave an article with a good amount of treats on top of it.
- If your dog loves toys, bring one with you to reward them after they finish the jackpot of treats. Play with them with a lot of energy and praise!
- When exiting the tracking area go past the end of the track and out about ten feet, then cross the field to the edge and come down the edge to the start point. This is very important if multiple people are using the area or if it is your only practice field. This will eliminate the possibility of you crossing a track and contaminating an area.
- Over time, you'll gradually increase the track length, duration of intense focus on track, and distractions.
- I usually will set two or three tracks at once and work from oldest to youngest set to allow for aging of the track. Space them out about ten to fifteen feet apart so you aren't asking your dog to sort competing odors.

Your footsteps in grass changes the topography. You break the vegetation as you pass, which creates odor. You create something like a tunnel, and the low spots catch the odor and create pools of intense odor. In comparison, picture asphalt. Your footsteps don't change it much. There's nothing to break or mow down. It's usually a wide open, flat space, so there's nothing to catch odor and create surfaces. The odor spreads like snow blowing on ice, unimpeded. And that means the track scent is faint and the plume is very large. So it's more difficult for the dog to stay at the source.

On hard surfaces like asphalt in the full sun during hot weather, the moisture disappears rapidly, and dry conditions are not as good for scenting as moist conditions.

Along the same lines, asphalt tends to get very hot in the sun, and this is less favorable for bacteria to inhabit the skin cells (aka rafts) that you shed as you walk along. Bacteria are a significant contributor to scent, by breaking down those rafts. Bacteria prefer warm, moist conditions. So very hot, dry asphalt means less bacteria, creating less detectable scent from your skin rafts.

POTTY YOUR DOG BEFORE YOU RUN YOUR TRACK! If your dog is not used to eliminating on leash or on cue then you should start working on that behavior now, independent of your tracking practice. I have all my dogs eliminate on cue while wearing a leash so that this is something that happens quickly when needed and reduces the possibility of the dog eliminating on the track.

You can set several tracks at once then work them both, making sure to give your dog about a ten minute break between them. This lets the dog relax and offers them an opportunity to track a slightly aged track.

Only move forward when your dog is moving forward. Do not back up to allow them to recheck an area and do not give them enough line to walk behind you. They need to understand that working a track means staying out in front of you and moving forward. **DON'T NAG YOUR DOG, LET THEM WORK!**

Hydrate between tracks. A wet nose is a good nose! The more moisture available in the air, the more odor is available. If your dog's nose gets too dry it makes it harder for them to pick up odor molecules and follow the track. Think of it like this: a wet nose is sticky and odor will stick to it.

If your dog is struggling to understand the game, when you start to lay your track on the first pass only shuffle from start to finish, turn at the end and shuffle back to the start, then shuffle and lay your articles and food on the third pass down the same track. This leaves more available odor for the dog to follow and hopefully makes the object of the game clearer.

Very important!!!! Do not allow your dog to back track along the track or walk behind you and when you are finished do not walk back to the car along the track you just worked.

Clean Up in Aisle 1

Tracking is an outdoor sport. Many people track year round in all but the most extreme weather. It's fun for you and the dog, keeps your skills sharp, and gives the dog an outlet for energy/anxiety, and builds confidence. However, if your dog is like mine any puddle is an adventure, holes in the ground are meant to be explored, and animal droppings are just a bonus find. Practice year round often results in some pretty dirty pups!

After running a track I make sure to wipe my dog down with a light colored microfiber towel. It allows me to check them for injuries, the microfiber picks up burrs and ticks that are not embedded, and knocks off some of the dirt before I put them in their crates.

If they are really dirty from the track I also will wash their paws off with a quick water rinse. I've found that doing this in the field means less dirt goes home with us, but mainly if they have broken or cracked a nail, cut a foot pad, or have a foreign body lodged in their foot I can address it right away as we often track miles from home.

A tupperware container with water in it works great as well as some of the foot baths they make for dogs now. I love this type and use it frequently at home too. <https://a.co/d/0dVT9U3I>

And if your pup is muddy chances are your long line is muddy too. This is where you will appreciate Biothane if you have one as it is easy to wash off and dries almost instantly. That is awesome if you are tracking in the morning and evening. Using a wet line is just plain gross and in my opinion is a source of odor that you don't want competing with your track. Leather lines need to be washed, dried, and oiled to maintain their strength, and cloth or rope lines always seem to have an odor even after washing.

What Size Line is Best?

If you have a large, strong dog you are going to want a sturdy line with good hardware on it. It is going to soak up a lot of repeated pressure. If you have a small breed dog then you are going to want to find a lighter line so they are not being weighed down.

If you have larger hands it is also more comfortable to have a flat line (and biothane comes in flat lines as well) to help you handle the line.

If you are using a flat line the most common sizes used are ¾" to 1" wide by 40' long for medium to large breed dogs. For puppies and new dogs I start with a ½" wide 10' - 15' line as they are not going to work too far out from you.

I don't like handles on the end of the line, I have had it become entangled on vegetation and had to interrupt our practice to free it. I always cut off the handle or order one without a handle. If you do this make sure to take a heavy duty tape and wrap around the end about a foot from the end so if you are working a track you can feel you are close to the end and know to stop feeding line out. I use duct tape for this as it is durable and withstands many line rinses.

Equipment You DON'T Want To Use For Tracking

You should NOT ever track with a choke chain, martingale, pinch/prong collar, shock collar, head halter, hands-free leash, flexi or no-pull harness. These are aversive and restrictive and may keep your dog from tracking properly.

Tracking requires a bit of pulling forward. It requires them to lean forward, look down, and focus on what is in front of them. If the gear they are wearing inhibits or stops that then the dog will never reach their full potential.

As I mentioned earlier, I use a specific harness for tracking with my dogs. It is not anything special, as there are very expensive leather tracking harnesses out there, but it is structured differently enough that my dog knows that harness means we are going to track. That harness is only worn when we are tracking. It goes on when they exit the crate and comes off before going back in.

Where I clip the line on the harness also communicates what we are doing at the moment. When they exit the crate the line is clipped on the front of the chest. When we approach the scent pad I stop and clip it on the back D-ring. That is usually when my dogs get excited because the entire process up to that moment has told them it's time.

If you have a dog with a shorter coat be aware of the equipment coming in contact with the dog. Metal on any harness, typically the D-ring and the leash clip, are the same temperature as the environment. If it is very cold out that metal ring will be very cold on the dog. Consider putting a coat or sweater on your short coated dog if you are going to track in cold weather (and you should!). If the dog finds the equipment uncomfortable, such as a freezing cold clip on their back, they will not want to wear the harness and will likely view the whole exercise as negative.

For dogs of all coats, sizes, abilities, and ages I do recommend that you get your dog comfortable wearing some type of dog boot or shoe. In extreme temperatures, hot or cold, their feet should be protected. And if your tracking interest gravitates towards SAR or variable surface tracking you will need to protect those pups feet against rubble, sharp debris, and hot pavement.

Communication is Key!

You've gathered your equipment, you've practiced laying tracks and working with a long line. Now what? You'll teach your dog to communicate to you that they have found an article on the track. In the scent world we call this an indication, or trained final response. It is a purposeful behavior done by the dog to tell the handler that they have found something. The most common indication in tracking is a down. However, small dogs, older dogs, handicapped dogs, and dogs with questionable joints may find laying down too hard or uncomfortable. So do not despair if your dog falls into that category. You can use a sit, a paw wave, or a freeze, as long as you are consistent with your criteria and rewarding the behavior to build it into an automatic response.

So what does an indication look like? You and your dog are moving along the track. They approach an item dropped on the track such as a glove, keys, carpet square, etc. The dog's response should be to perform the chosen indication at the article to alert you to its presence. For my dogs, they encounter an object and will down and wait for me to approach.

- Passive alert - freeze, sit, down, stand, stare
- Active alert - scratch, bark, paw
- Undesirable alerts – when a dog scratches, bites, or disturbs objects in a way that contaminates the area or object. These alerts are usually not used and often result in a failure if trialing.

A word about the trained final response you and your dog will use. If your dog has a wonderful automatic sit, or defaults to a sit when you are training and they are waiting for you to offer a cue or guidance then you should try to utilize a down behavior to avoid confusion and false alerts. Most tracking teams use a "down". There will be times that your dog's body language practically screams they've found an object but don't give the trained final response. Repetition and practice will reduce, and hopefully eliminate, the instances of a lack of indication. This is why you need clear criteria in your training and very high value reinforcements.

AKC Tracking Titles

The American Kennel Club offers tests of various skills involved in many areas of tracking. While the thought of trialing for the novice can be quite intimidating, I'd encourage you to go and watch a trial. They are fun, a great way to test your dog's skills, and you will meet the nicest people who share your love of the sport. An overview of the AKC program is below.

Tracking Dog (TD) - The first title to be earned by your team would be Tracking Dog (TD). The track is laid to be between 440 to 500 yards long and includes a minimum of three and a maximum of five direction changes. The track is aged one half to two hours before being used.

Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX) - The TDX is earned by following an "older" track, aged three to five hours, that is 800 to 1,000 yards long and has five to seven directional changes. This level also will have human cross tracks laid over the primary track.

Variable Surface Tracking (VST) - In this track the dogs work through urban settings, as well as through wooded areas. A VST dog has demonstrated this ability by following a three to five hour-old track in areas that might include streets, sidewalks, building interiors, and other areas with little to no vegetation like a parking lot or playground.

Champion Tracker (CT) - A dog that has successfully completed all three tracking titles (TD, TDX and VST) earns the prestigious title of Champion Tracker.

Tracking Dog Urban (TDU) - The Tracking Dog Urban (TDU) test is another test. The dog must follow a track laid by a person under a variety of conditions in an urban environment and find the placed articles. This is an optional titling event. Clubs are not required to offer this test and dogs are not required to earn the title to enter a TD, TDX, or VST tracking test.

Week 1- NO DOGS FIRST CLASS we will cover the basics of the sports and distribute kits

- What is tracking
- Foundation skills for the sport
 - Confident enough to work with head down
 - A reliable "down" cue
 - Can focus working outdoors
- Overview of track laying
- Overview of equipment
 - Long line
 - Harness
 - Articles
 - Tracking flags
 - Tracking treats
 - Keep in mind when the weather is warmer the food laid in tracks will attract bugs, especially ants. Many dogs will not eat a treat covered in bugs. If you live in an area where there are fire ants please make sure to avoid their nests when laying your track. Freezing your food prior to track laying also makes it less enticing for bugs, as well as tracking in the early morning when it is cooler.
 - Vehicle set up
 - Tug toy
- Storing your equipment
 - Being mindful of odor
- Your dog's amazing nose: how it works
 - The physical structures
 - Helping your dog to find odor
- Support for your dog before, during, and after a search
 - Water must always be available
 - Learning to read your dog's body language
 - Basic field items to keep with you during a training session
 - First aid kit, water, dog boots for rough terrain, extra leash, GPS or map app
 - What to do after the track
 - Support for your dog
 - Physical exam
 - Hydration and calorie support
 - Opportunity to rest and recover
- Teaching a trained final response

Week 2 - Track Laying **BRING YOUR DOG TO THE CLASS**

- Set up a training area
 - How to generalize the training in the first week
 - Start small and contained and build the picture in layers
- Do not crowd your dog- make sure to place a mark in the middle of your line to help you determine the distance
- Make sure your dog is hydrated and not too hot
- Keeping track of your sessions

Count your number of steps: 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7... up to 25, then put a flag outside your left foot. Look at your landmark and resume. Count 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 31...up to 50.

At the end of the track, place a food drop to reward the dog for completing the track. Use 5-10 pieces in a row. Note that a row of treats has a larger surface area, so it's higher intensity and easier to smell than a single stack of treats (which some dogs may run over and miss, especially if they're running fast).

Jump another 3 large leaps (about 10 ft) to place the end flag. (Don't forget you never put the end flag at the food drop. That would allow the dog to just run to the flag and eat the food. The flag is to show you where the track is, and you know the end party should happen about 10 ft before the flag).

On the second pass (back to the starting scent pad), follow in the same footprints as much as possible. Place food on the ground an average of every 6-12 inches. It's not bad if you have too much food and the dog doesn't eat it all. It's far worse if you don't put enough food down to motivate the dog to follow the footsteps, and your dog quits as a result.

As you walk back to your car, make sure you stay at least 15 feet away from the track. You don't want to present a few tracks for the dog to guess which to follow. You want one clear, easy track with no wrong options.

Go to your car and get your dog. There is no need to let the track age (meaning it doesn't need to sit there before the dog tracks). Fresh tracks are easier and more motivational, so we're saving aging for a future challenge.


At your vehicle, you can put your tracking gear on your dog, but don't hook the longline to the clip on their back until you're ready to track. Spend 10 minutes minimum to let your dog sniff around the area, get comfortable around the distractions and urinate/defecate. Every dog can benefit from at least a 10 minute warmup. If you have a warmup routine like stretching or playing, then follow your routine.

When your dog starts moving ahead on the track, let them get ahead of you 6-10 feet before you follow in their footsteps. The dog should be independently sniffing ahead of you along the track.

Don't use the same tracking location 2 days in a row. (So, don't track at location #1 on Monday and Tuesday. Instead, wait until Wednesday to reuse the area.) This will help to avoid confusion from multiple detectable tracks at different ages. There is no reason to age your track at this point. Lay the track, then go get your dog and run it.

Week 3- Increasing distance and adding turns

By now your dog should become excited at the thought of tracking with you, the most amazing person they know!

- Setting up your training session. Dogs are natural hunters, their eyes have developed to detect movement, not fine details.
 - Be mindful of distractions, the wind/weather, and have a plan in mind
 - Don't forget to chart your training to keep track of your progress
 - Pick a smooth, mowed area to set the dog up for success- think lawn or grassy area
 - Don't forget to chart your track
 -  Using an app on your phone will help you with this

- If your dog struggles with staying on track and moving forward then add more articles with food on them to the track. The goal is to start spacing them farther apart and reduce the amount of food left on the track until it is just articles and the only food will be at the finish square
- We will set tracks that are 20-30' long before the first turn, 20-30' long after the turn with a scent pad at the end
- If your dog is a master at the two legged track then feel free to add in another turn to make a three sided square, remembering to include a scent pad at the end

Things to keep in mind: Your dog needs to believe that tracking with you is more fun than searching on their own. Your energy, reward, and praise need to support this. Have a really great reward party with them and make them eager to get to the finish line. If they pick up the article, do not scold them, we will work on that if needed. Don't chase them for the article and pull/tug to get it out of their mouth, or let them run zoomies with it. Trade a high value treat or toy for the article. Practice makes perfect, practice the skills you want!

Week 4- 6 Increasing skills and adding distance

- For the last three weeks we will continue the earlier lessons, adding distance and turns to the track
- Focus on clean criteria
 - Same start ritual
 - Put on harness, focus the dog
 - Same starting cue
 - Remember to start calling "alert" when your dog finds the article and finished when you've reached the final scent pad
- If at any point your dog disengages, loses focus or gets distracted by wildlife odor, refocus them onto an easy task and end on success. Make sure to play with them and give lots of praise!
- Always end your training sessions with something fun like tug, lots of praise, and quit while they are still fresh and wanting more

Things will start to progress a bit quicker now that the dog understands the basics of the game. The amount of time you spend working on this step is very dependent on your dog's understanding of what we are asking. This is a critical step to success so don't rush this one! Practice good habits and don't cut corners.

Some things will affect your training so they should be on your radar. If your dog is on antibiotics it will diminish their sense of smell for up to 30 days after the last dose depending on the type and dosage. If your dog has to go on steroids or allergy medication long term their body will eventually adapt, however initially you may see them struggle with scent problems.

If your dog is a female in season they will be distracted and not really focusing on the task at hand. You might want to keep the drills very short, visual, and easy in a familiar place until they are out of season.

If your dog is extremely distracted by wildlife you will likely have to do some counterconditioning outside of tracking practice to overcome this. If you do not address habits like chasing deer, rabbits, birds at this phase you reduce the success rate for your dog in the field with each time they practice the behavior.

Training notes to keep in mind

In a perfect world tracking happens in all types of weather and on all types of surfaces. Once your dog is doing well and understands this game other surfaces can be added. Ground disturbance smells distinctly different on different surfaces. Once your dog is successful at a basic track then you can up the challenge with different areas. Choose from short grass, tall grass, gravel, dirt, snow, concrete, asphalt, wood shavings, mulch, rubber playground, wooden walkway, etc.

Choosing a new location to track in should also include you scanning for distractions BEFORE you lay your track. If your dog is obsessed with squirrels and it is a squirrel bonanza in the park you chose, maybe you skip that area until your dog is better with distractions. Remember we are setting them up for success!

Make sure your dog is hungry in the early phases. We want them to be searching for the treats with gusto.

Search styles will vary by dog. Some are eager and pulling to get to the articles, some are more cautious and careful as they work the track, and some are going to be working back and forth on and off the track. Let them work and figure out the game. My spaniel hunts and utilizes a zig-zag type pattern when in a field. It took several sessions for her to decide sticking to the track yielded better rewards so oftentimes if we back up and give them room to problem solve they will hit the mark. This also applies to the dog who gets distracted by something in the area. If they stray too far off the track stop and wait for them to get back to work or if they are hopelessly focused on that distraction then bring them back to where you are and restart the search from that point.

In the early phases if the dog skips a piece of food or zooms past an article but they are on the track let them work. Indications on articles will come with repetition. Encourage a dog that is eagerly pulling ahead to follow the track.

Problem solving in training

If we keep our sessions simple and use lots of reward early on your dog will start to look forward to the harness coming out. All sport training has ups and downs, make sure to give yourself and your dog some grace on the days it does not go as planned.

The biggest issue most people face in this sport is dealing with distractions. The reality of it is at the end of the day it is a management issue. Make sure to eliminate as many of the distractions that you reasonably can. You will also need to work on desensitizing the dog to those distractions outside of tracking. If your dog loses their mind around ducks, go sit where there are some ducks and work on building a solid check in behavior and reward for ignoring the ducks.

If your dog gets frustrated easily and stops tracking to take direction from you then you likely need to set shorter tracks for a bit and have a big party at the end. There is no obedience in scent work and that includes tracking!

Make sure your dog is actually tracking and not just frolicking in the grass. Their head should be down and oftentimes you should hear audible sniffing. If they raise their head once in a while and sniff the wind that is okay, but they should drop their head again and work the track. If they do not they are likely not actually tracking.

If your dog pulls like a freight train make sure the gear is sturdy enough to handle it and you might want to wear a glove on the hand you use to control the line.

If your dog is using the flags as a target item you can eliminate them and place a rock there instead. This usually only becomes a problem if you consistently place food near a flag. To avoid this issue make sure to never drop food within 3-4' of a flag.

REMEMBER, THIS IS A FUN BONDING ACTIVITY FOR YOU AND YOUR DOG. THERE WILL BE GOOD DAYS AND NOT SO GOOD DAYS TRACKING, BUT YOUR DOG WILL LOVE YOU FOR THE TIME YOU'VE SPENT WITH THEM!