



### **Training Alone** **By Rosemary Janoch**

After I socialize my puppy in a local puppy kindergarten class, I do most of my obedience training on my own. Heeling, retrieving, jumping, and stay exercises are all taught in the privacy of my own backyard. I know that eventually my young dog needs to learn that sits and downs will be done in the company of other dogs, that the “stand for exam” will not always be performed by me, and that the perfect front must be mastered even when a judge is walking up directly behind him. Having my obedience dog master these skills is a necessity and will involve many hours of working him in the company of other trainers, but there is much that can be done first by training alone.

I feel the same way about the sport of tracking. Although my tracking dog must become acclimated to tracking while two judges and a tracklayer follow behind us, and must also learn to ignore the random sounds made by the watching gallery, he doesn't need this training on a weekly basis. Nor does he need this training at the beginning of his tracking career. I can structure a sound training program for my dog by exposing him only to my own tracks and training alone.

I like to have a puppy watch the tracks being walked for the first several tracking sessions. If I have someone tracking with me, I let that individual hold the puppy on the ground facing me as I talk to the puppy and show him the treat and the glove. The person continues to hold the puppy as I walk away merrily waving the treat and glove over my head as I lay the track. If I have to train alone, however, I can accomplish this same training lesson by bringing a puppy crate into the field. I put the puppy in his crate with his harness already on. I talk to him and show him the treat on the glove making sure the puppy has the opportunity to smell the treat.



## Putting the puppy crate right at the starting stake allows the puppy to watch his track being laid.

I generally double lay puppy tracks, so as I carry on a cheery conversation with the puppy I walk out 10-15 yards, turn toward the puppy, toss the glove in the air several times, place it on the ground with a treat on it, and quickly retrace my steps as I return to him. I then open the crate door, orient the puppy so he faces the direction of the track, snap the leash on the harness, and encourage the puppy to find the treat which is sitting on the glove.



Be sure to focus the puppy's attention in the correct direction before allowing him to move forward.

I work with an older dog in a similar fashion although I do *not* want to carry a full size metal crate into the field. Since I still want the dog to see me and hear me as I lay the track, I do one of two things. If my minivan can be backed up to the location where I want to start the track, then I just pop open the tail gate and let the dog watch from his car crate. I would still let the inexperienced dog see the glove and smell the treat just as I did with the puppy.



Both adults and puppies can watch tracks being laid from the comfort and safety of the car.

If the start of the track is at a location where I cannot let the dog watch me from the car, I will *chain* the dog to a nearby tree and repeat the procedure of showing him the glove and treat, and letting him watch me lay the track.



When using a tree to hold a dog, be sure to have the harness already on the dog so that you can run him without delay when you return from laying the track.

My husband laughs when he sees me throw the “junk yard dog” chain in the car, but over the many years I have tracked dogs alone I have accumulated way too many eight inch long leather leashes. Those leather leashes used to be six feet long until I used them to tie a dog to a tree. Eight inches is about how much room the dog needs to turn his head around and chew through the leash. Never underestimate how quickly a motivated dog can chew through a leash. If you need to increase your dog’s motivation to track, however, try playing tug with the glove immediately before you lay the track.



You can increase a dog’s motivation to track by playing a game of tug with the glove.

Highly motivated tracking dogs have also convinced me to tether dogs using only full sized trees and not bushes, saplings, or even fallen logs. I once walked a 50 yard track for a 9 months old Golden Retriever. He was tied to a large fallen log. By the time I turned around to let him see me toss the glove in the air he had covered almost two-thirds of the distance to me dragging the log behind him by his *neck* since I had not yet hooked him up to his harness. As I said before, *never* underestimate the desire of a highly motivated tracking dog to get to the glove.

Once your dog is beyond the beginning stages of training, you no longer need to have him watch the tracks being laid. You can then just leave him in the car as you lay longer tracks and age them.

Since you will be running the track by yourself, bring an appropriate bag in which you can collect your clothespins or other markers with which you marked your track because no one will be following behind you to pick them up as you run the track with your dog. If you have a dog that is too powerful or too wild for you to let go of the lead with one hand, then either walk the track again at a later time and pick up your markers, or learn to lay your track using only natural field markers. If you are in an area where your dog would be safe off lead, you have a reliable recall, and you aren’t breaking any local leash laws, you can release your dog to explore the area while you walk the track backwards and pick up your markers. I always seem to lose one or two of my markers when I walk the track backwards, though, and I am not too thrilled about having my dog follow the track backwards either, so this is probably my least favorite way to collect my markers. I generally use a combination of the first two methods since I use obvious field markers like tall strange looking weeds and patches of bare dirt to mark my track, but I will use my brightly colored clothespins at spots where I feel I have no distinctive field markers to help me locate the track.

As you age your tracks for longer and longer periods of time, boredom can set in when you are tracking by yourself. I suggest you bring along something to read in the car or bring something to do like one of those Sudoku puzzles that are so addictive. You can even clean out your car if you are truly bored. If the track needs to be aged for a considerable amount of time, consider running a few errands if the weather permits leaving the dog in the car as you run in and out of stores.

Speaking of leaving the dog in the car, I like to train my dog to handle varying amounts of “wait time” in the car. I will drive to a tracking location with a TDX trainee and stay at the site with the dog for the entire 3 hours while the track is aging. The dog comes out of his crate for potty breaks and is returned to the car to wait. This prepares him for the tracking test where I draw the last track of the day. My dog and I both need to be prepared to wait a substantial amount of time without losing our ability to focus when the opportunity finally arrives to run the track.

On the other hand, suppose I got lost on the way to the tracking test and arrived just in time for the draw. As luck would have it, I draw the first track and must pull my dog out of the car and run a track immediately. I have confidence that my dog can do that because I train for that in my practice sessions. To recreate this scenario, I lay my TDX track in a field not too far from my house while my dog sits at home. I return home after laying the track and do a load or two of laundry or go grocery shopping. I use up 3-4 hours doing odd jobs around the house and then I load my dog into the car, drive to the site, pull him out of the car, put on his harness, and run him without any “wait time” at all. My dogs are comfortable with either of the above situations because I practice them both several times before entering a tracking test. You should be sure your dog can also handle a short wait, a long wait, and anything in between before entering a test.

Training a TDX dog alone can be difficult if you have no one to lay cross tracks for you. You would certainly never enter a test unless your dog had worked appropriately aged cross tracks during several different training sessions, so eventually you are going to have to find two people who can walk the cross tracks for you. But it isn't necessary to train cross tracks at every single training session. Nor is it necessary to have formal cross tracks put in when you *do* want to work with track contamination. You could simply lay your track in a high traffic area of a local park. You will very likely get a lot of cross track training done if you pick the right location.

If you put in a track at a location where you know no one is going to randomly walk across it, be sure to bring one of your retired dogs along with you in the car. When it comes time to put in the cross tracks, get your old timer out of the car and get his favorite tennis ball. Since you have no doubt thought this out ahead of time, walk him to within throwing distance of a leg that you want to have a cross track on and start throwing his tennis ball. Your old timer will run over the track on his way out to the ball, and will cross it again as he returns. Don't be shy about throwing that ball several times for him so that there are plenty of cross tracks for your young dog to sort through when he gets to that spot on the track.

Having an animal put in a cross track for you also helps to teach your young dog not to “critter” when he is supposed to be tracking. Crittering has caused many dogs to fail when the smell of another animal becomes more interesting than the smell of the track. If your dog tends to critter, consider having a friend walk their dog (or horse, or goat, etc.) over your track instead of the traditional two person cross track. A person/animal cross track can be very tempting for a tracking dog to follow, so be prepared to refocus your dog's attention back to the main track if the cross track lures him away.

Remember that it is easy to get sloppy laying a track when you are training alone, so always make good maps. It is also easy to get sloppy on your handling when you lay your own tracks and know where they go, so be sure the *dog* is doing the tracking and is committed to each new leg of the track before you turn to follow him.

You will need to train with other trackers every once in a while just so you can run a blind track. A blind track will keep you an honest handler. If you are at the TDX level, you will also need to train periodically with others to get in the necessary cross track training.

Finally, for those many times that you are training by yourself, keep safety in mind. Carry a cell phone on your person whether you are laying a track or running one. Make sure it works in the area where you are tracking. Let someone know where you will be and when you should be returning home. Carry water with you and an extra car key and, of course, choose a location based on safety factors if you are tracking alone.