

Crosstracks

By Rosemary Janoch

Since even a well trained tracking dog will occasionally take a crosstrack, I want to devote this article to crosstrack training. Although I have taught crosstracks to my dogs in the summer months, I prefer to train them in the winter when both the main track and the crosstracks are visible in the snow. This gives me a unique opportunity to understand exactly what my dog is doing. If there is no snow in your part of the country, however, these techniques will still work. You simply need to mark all tracks and crosstracks well so you know exactly where they are located.

Crosstrack training should ideally start while your dog is still working on the TD title. If you try to do your training in publicly used areas like parks and school yards, you will be laying your training tracks directly on top of older, randomly placed, crosstracks. This is why you must never get discouraged with a dog that is having difficulty tracking a straight line. The dog may be working his way through a crosstrack that you are completely unaware exists.

While working a dog on basic TD work, I used to panic when someone walked over my track. I would even abandon the track all together and lay a new track somewhere else. Now I welcome the opportunity to get in a little extra training. Take careful note of where the crosstrack is and be ready to encourage your dog through the contaminated area.

If you are in an area of the country that gets snow, deliberately lay your training track over animal tracks, people tracks, snowmobile tracks, cross country ski ruts, and any other tracks you can find in the snow. Winter is when I "deer" proof my dogs. I'll lay a track back and forth over a well used deer path, encouraging my dog when he is doing well, verbally reminding him to get back to work when he is distracted, until he learns to ignore the smell of deer. I know that I have seen many dogs fail in my area (PA, MI, and OH) by taking a deer path. Use the winter months to get this valuable training done.

If you enjoy challenging your dog, have a leg on the track follow a deer path (yes, right on top of it!) for fifty yards or so, and then leave it. You will be thrilled the first time your dog shows you he clearly understands his job as he turns off the deer path and follows the original track in a new direction.

All of the above training should be done in preparation for teaching crosstracks to an advanced dog. Now the training becomes more formalized.

For a dog's introduction to a planned crosstrack, have only one person cross the track, not two people like he will have at a test. If this is the dog's very first lesson on crosstracks, don't make the dog do turns. You walk the dotted line in Figure 1. The crosstrack layer has all the hard work to do because the crosstrack layer must walk the solid line in Figure 1, weaving back and forth across your straight track providing your dog with multiple opportunities to experience crosstracks. Later, as the dog progresses and becomes more confident, have the crosstrack layer walk the straight line and you lay the track with all the turns. The dog will now have to manage all of the turns as well as the four crosstracks. Either way, I place an article shortly after each crosstrack so that the dog is quickly rewarded for ignoring the crosstrack and remaining on the main track.

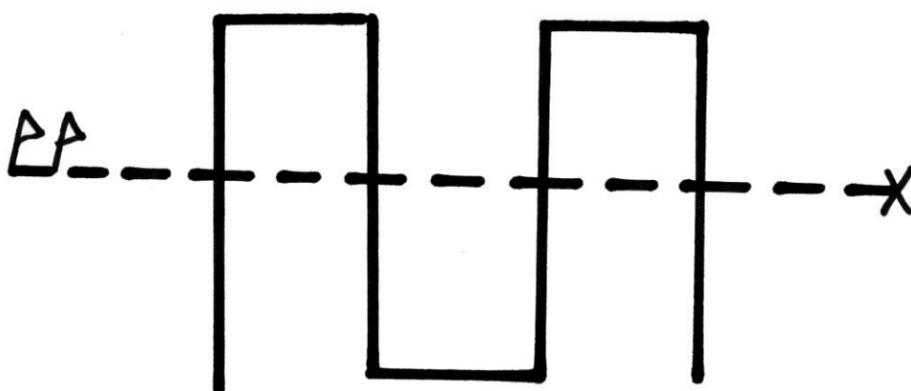


FIGURE 1

To help the dog clearly understand that the crosstrack is not the track the dog was originally following, try to have the main tracklayer and the crosstrack layer differ significantly in weight. If the main track is walked by a 200 pound man and the crosstrack is walked by a 130 pound woman, there should be no doubt in your dog's mind which track he is supposed to be following. When the dog is confident with this scenario, reverse it. Have the 130 pound woman walk the main track and have the 200 pound man walk the crosstrack. In this instance, the crosstracks will most likely be more appealing than the main track. Keep your dog focused on the main track and, if necessary, verbally encourage him beyond the crosstracks. Wiggle your fingers in the grass with an excited "Look what's over here!" if you need to get the dog back onto the main track.

What if you don't have two friends that have a 70 pound weight differential? Pack 10 to 20 pounds of tracking books, obedience books, and field training books into a backpack and hand it to the heavier of your two friends. Proceed as above with the heavier person initially walking the main track and the lighter person walking the crosstrack. Personally, I like to lay all of my own tracks, so I look for a tracking buddy that is lighter than me for one training session and then a second training buddy that is heavier than me for the next session (or hand over the backpack!) so that my dog learns to be comfortable no matter what sex the crosstrack layer is or how light or heavy the crosstrack layer happens to be.

Since it is my job to minimize any confusion on the dog's part, I do more than just have the tracklayer and crosstrack layer have different weights. I also make the age of the tracks radically different for a dog that is just beginning to understand crosstracks. For example, I might age the main track for 90 minutes, have someone crosstrack it, and then immediately run the dog on it. The crosstrack is clearly fresher than the main track on which the dog was started. The difference between the two tracks should be obvious to the dog.

You can age your track a full 3 hours and still put a fresh 10-15 minute old crosstrack on it. Your dog needs to learn to stay on the original track no matter how fresh or enticing the crosstracks are.

Don't get fixated on the time differential between the main track and the crosstracks. Vary the times from one extreme to the other. Use a very fresh crosstrack one day and then use a crosstrack that is almost as old as the main track at your next training session. With this method, random or incidental crosstracks will now be irrelevant to your dog.

If you have a fast tracking dog that runs right over the top of crosstracks without even noticing them, count your blessings. This type of dog may not notice the crosstracks on the day of his TDX test either, but I wouldn't want to gamble on it. It is better to get the dog to acknowledge the crosstracks so that some learning can take place. To be sure the dog notices the crosstracks at some point in your training, have the crosstrack layer take baby steps across the main track to accent the crosstrack. Or have the crosstrack layer take a dog or two along when she walks the crosstrack. Or have the crosstracks put in at less than a 90 degree angle to entice the dog (see Figure 2). Be creative...you'll think of something.

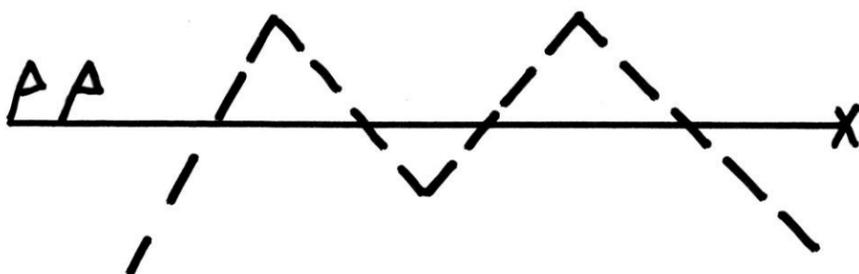


FIGURE 2

What if no one can lay a crosstrack for you and you really want to get some training done? You can lay a P track which is shown in Figure 3. You cross over your own track. The dog has to sort through two crosstracks. I have done this with my own dogs and, surprisingly, this is not as hard for the dogs to figure out as it looks.

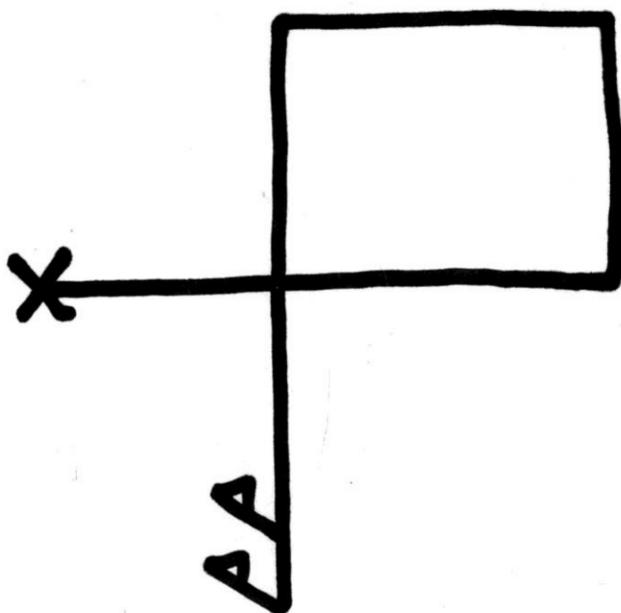


FIGURE 3

You can also use the backpack method to increase your own weight for either the main track or the crosstrack. Some trackers even change shoes when they are walking their own crosstracks. I'm not sure that does much to help the dog, but if it makes you feel better, go right ahead and change your shoes. Personally, I don't ever walk my own crosstracks. I find other people to put in the crosstracks for me.

Eventually, you must use two people to crosstrack your track since that is what the dog will encounter at a test. There is no hard and fast rule about when to do this. I do it whenever I happen to have two people with me. Many times my TDX training tracks have only one crosstrack layer, or maybe none at all.

At an official TDX test, there should not be a crosstrack on the first leg of the track. Accidents happen, however, and so I like to prepare my dog for the worst. Therefore, I randomly put crosstracks on any leg of the track including the first one.

Always, always, always know where the main track is located. Make detailed maps, or clearly use markers throughout the track. Nothing will discourage a tracking dog more than being corrected for making a legitimate turn because the handler believed the dog was taking a crosstrack. You can set your training back many weeks, or even months, with repeated errors of this type. If in doubt, go with your dog. But if you ever discover that you have just followed your dog onto a crosstrack, slap yourself on the wrist several times and vow to make better maps in the future!