

FACTORS THAT EFFECT SCENTING CONDITIONS

1. Wind -- The best way to judge wind is to release smoke at ground level. Any track that goes through areas of changing wind (like gullies, rolling hills, and depressions) will be challenging for the dog. Scent flows around and spins all over.
2. Temperature -- For training purposes, you should train in very warm weather but don't age the track fully. For dogs that can do an hour, only age the track for 30 minutes. On hills, air currents move up the hill in the morning when the cool air is warming up in the sun, and the air currents move down in the evening as the warm air cools off.
3. Humidity -- High humidity can play havoc with scent. Rain can wash the scent down lower to the ground, forcing a dog's head lower and lower to get the scent. A light rain, however, can freshen an old track. On a foggy, windless day a person's body scent seems to hang in the air and is distributed over a wide area off the actual track, causing the dog to wander all over the area.
4. Vegetation -- Newly mowed lawn can be overpowering to a dog. If you can smell it, don't track in it. Cornfields are hard for dogs to track in... if a test is being held on cornfields, pass it up and enter some other test, although you should give your dog the experience during training of tracking on all sorts of vegetation including cornfields, bare dirt, wildflowers, mint, and over dry leaves, pine needles, rocks and gravel, creeks and creek beds, tall "over his head" weeds, dense cover, thin or sparse cover, standing water (not just puddles), marshy ground, etc. Introduce any new cover to the dog by simply going for a walk through it in a non-tracking situation.
5. Terrain -- Tracks that parallel the tops of ridges or that turn on hillsides must be practiced with your dog. If the dog is tracking down a hill, he will very likely overshoot a turn on the side of the hill just from momentum alone. If the track is laid along the side of a hill, gravity will gradually pull the dog toward the bottom of the hill (this is how Trek failed his first TDX track!). Tracks going from open ground into woods, or from woods to open ground, will change scent conditions. Sometimes just moving back and forth from shade into sunshine will not only change the temperature of the track but will change the scent.

6. Snow tracking can be fun and easy for the dog and handler as long as the handler doesn't use the visible track as a crutch and guides the dog. After the snow melts, handlers often become insecure about the dog's performance. Dogs, at the same time, are often overwhelmed with the unfamiliar scent conditions of early spring when the new shoots of grass make scenting hard. An insecure handler with a confused dog is a bad combination! I would encourage you to track all winter long... just be aware of the possible confusion on the dog's part in the spring.
7. Medications -- Heart worm medication that is started in the spring often effect the dog for a week or two. Be patient. The problem is only a temporary one. Be aware of other medications, too. Ask your vet if the medication is likely to have side effects.
8. Age of the track -- The track age can combine with other factors to really effect the scent. For instance, a one hour old track on a hot, dry day can seem as old as a three hour old track on a cool day. One way to slowly start aging tracks for a beginner dog is to make the track longer and single laid. The track ages naturally as you return to the dog. Another way is to not put on the dog's harness until the tracklayer is done laying the track. Age the track only 5 minutes at a time to start, then 10 minutes, etc. Age it even less quickly (minute by minute) if necessary.
9. Age of the dog -- Just like people see and hear less well as they get older, older dogs cannot smell as well as they did in their prime. This means that older dogs may need more time and patience and fresher tracks than a young dog. However, they do not lose the ability to smell, so you should not rule out training a dog on age alone. Is the dog healthy, active, lively, and willing should be more important questions than the dog's age.
10. Time of day -- Scent conditions change throughout the day, so practice tracks at all sorts of different times. However, since most tests are held between 8am and noon, be sure to practice at those times of the day regularly. Remember that coming home from work and tracking in the evening will prepare your dog for an evening test, not a morning test.