



Getting started with Spring Tracking

By Rosemary Janoch

Spring is an ideal time to get yourself and your dog outside after a long cold winter. Start by conditioning both yourself and your dog with walks. Gradually increase the length of the walks, and the speed at which you walk, until both you and your dog are in top form. Make sure that some of these walks are in the park on bridle trails, and that some of them are through wide open fields. If it is a safe area, let your dog run free and really stretch those muscles. If you have acquired a new puppy over the winter, it is especially important to let the puppy explore the interesting sights and smells of a field before you ask the puppy to focus on a track. Tracking with a puppy is a wonderful way to promote the puppy/owner bond and to encourage a good reliable work ethic from the very start.

All you need to get started is a tracking harness or a buckle collar, a six foot lead, an object that is highly motivational (a fuzzy squeaky toy works well), and some especially yummy treats. It also helps to have a tracking buddy, although this is not a necessity. Knowing that your tracking buddy is going to be at the park at 8 am on Saturday morning, however, is a great motivator to get *you* out of bed. A tracking partner can also gently restrain your puppy with fingers across the chest while you are laying the puppy's track.

Tracking, however, can be done alone. I have left my dog in a crate in the back of an open minivan. I can talk to him the entire time I am laying his track. He can see me toss his toy in the air a few times, and he can see me put a treat on the toy. Expect to hear some serious barking. Most dogs do *not* like being left behind in the car. Even if you have a tracking partner holding your dog for you, you will likely hear a substantial amount of barking and fussing. This is great! Your dog is frustrated with the restraint and wants to get out there and get that toy. Your dog has a "Put me in, coach!" attitude. Having that kind of attitude is half the battle. The other half of the battle is getting the dog to understand what we want.

I suggest you start by laying a straight line track of no more than 15 or 20 paces. Mark the track well with flags or other markers so you know precisely where the track is located. No matter where your dog goes, *you* must stay on the track. Many handlers double lay the tracks for

a dog that is just beginning. This means walking out the 15 or 20 paces, placing the toy on the ground with a treat, and returning to the original starting point by retracing your footsteps. Whether you double lay tracks or not is largely a matter of personal preference. I have seen marvelous tracking dogs taught both ways. Now attach a six foot lead to the harness or buckle collar and let the dog pull you to the toy. If the dog is swinging from one side of the track to the other, shorten the amount of lead the dog has to work with and continue walking forward on the track. This will serve to keep the dog closer to the track. Praise your dog profusely when the toy is reached. Give an additional treat or two accompanied with sincere petting and praising. No more than three of these tracks should be done on any given day.

As your dog begins to understand this new game, increase the length of each track. As the tracks increase in length, cut back to only two tracks, and then finally cut back to just one. In the beginning, I try to lay the tracks directly into the wind. This will cause the smell of the toy and the treat to blow directly toward the dog's nose. Later, when the dog has more experience, I disregard the wind direction. When turns are introduced, the wind again plays a big factor, but training turns will be discussed in another article.

On a final note, I would like to remind all of you who have been tracking all winter that scenting conditions radically change in the spring. As the winter snow melts and the spring rains begin, the ground becomes soggy with a whole new smell of its own. The smell of new plant growth can overwhelm the most confident of trackers. Remember that animals like deer and rabbits will be active in the spring and, therefore, more likely to provide you with unplanned crosstracks. And let's not forget about all the spring babies. I once almost stepped on a fawn before it jumped up and ran away. Be aware, also, that many bitches come into season in the spring. This will throw off not only the girls in your house, but the boys as well. I have also heard from many tracking folk that when they begin their dogs on heartworm medication in the spring, the dogs seem to need about two to three weeks to adapt to it. If you plan on entering a spring test, I would advise you to not start your dog on this medication the week before the test. Be sure to plan ahead. All of the above factors can make your tracking dog have difficulty. I would suggest that you do what any good trainer does when a dog is having difficulty...simplify the task. Shorten the track length, shorten the track's age, reduce the number of turns, and increase the chance of the dog's success. Do not become discouraged with a spring setback. Remain upbeat with your dog and leave each tracking session on a positive note.