



Proofing

By Rosemary Janoch

The concept of proofing is well known to obedience exhibitors. When training a young dog to retrieve the dumbbell for instance, the trainer teaches the dog to perform the retrieve command even when the dumbbell lands under a chair, near the baby gates, up on its end, or at the foot of the judge. The theory behind proofing is that if the dog can perform the exercise under these unusual circumstances then performing the exercise in the ring under normal circumstances will be a breeze.

As tracking exhibitors, we sometimes forget to proof in our training even though it can be just as valuable a tool for us as it is for obedience exhibitors. There are some obvious ways to proof our dogs and some not so obvious ways. I suggest you try to proof your tracking dog against animal issues, people issues, equipment issues, inexperienced dog issues, and minimum requirement issues.

Proofing your tracking dog against animal issues would include such things as laying training tracks past ground hog holes, through goose poop, past animal carcasses, and on, over, and parallel to established deer paths. It would also include proofing your dog against distractions from horseback riders and pet people encounters with their loose dogs. Since these last two items deal with finding live animals to expose your tracking dog to, get some friends to bring their dogs out to your tracking site and have them walk their dogs around on leash as your dog runs his track. If you have friends with horses, have them do the same thing. If you don't know anyone with a horse, you will have to improvise by finding where local horseback riders typically ride and lay a training track somewhere near that location.

Since proofing your dog against people issues is really important for a green dog, many of these comments will be more appropriate for a TD dog than a more experienced TDX dog. Also keep in mind that VST trainers *really* need to proof their dogs against people issues!

You might start by proofing your dog against reacting to the judges following behind you. Have some friends act as judges. During one training session have them follow closely behind. During the next training session have them follow really far behind you. I have always found that my dogs are more disturbed and distracted by people who are at a distance. I have had to tell people to move all the way up to me and walk beside me when my young dogs could not focus on the track because of the people following behind. After a time or two with the people walking with me, the dog is generally willing to allow them to follow behind. You do not want the test day to be the first time your dog sees people 60 yards behind him following along. That can be a spooky experience for a young dog.

Once your dog can handle people behind him, start putting people in front of him. Lay a track that heads directly toward a group of friends. This proofing will come in handy if you ever get a track that heads directly toward the gallery. One time have them laughing and talking. The next time have them dead silent. Try to lay tracks where hikers, joggers, dog walkers, etc. are clearly visible to your dog as he tries to focus on his track. Even arrange to have a jogger run right over the first leg of the track just as you are about to start your dog. Proof him against such a distraction because one of these days you might want to enter a tracking test in Cleveland. One of our local tests here in Cleveland is held on the grounds of a parochial school which has a convent on the campus. We are delighted to use this beautiful campus and so we would not even dream of telling the Sisters who teach there where they can and cannot walk on their own grounds, so we always warn the exhibitors about nuns randomly strolling across their tracks. Have you proofed your dog against such unexpected pedestrians?

Proof your dog against interruptions by people. I have had park rangers come up to me while I was in the middle of running a track to ask me what I was doing. My dog needs to stop his track and then needs to restart it when I ask him to continue. You might be thinking this would never happen on a real track, so why proof for this? Well, I was at a track where the judges believed the dog had overshot the corner and blew the whistle. They then realized they had made a mistake and the dog was actually right on the corner. After a brief conversation with the handler who had returned to the judges, they instructed the handler to continue the dog from where they had blown the whistle. The handler could not get the dog refocused on the track and they failed. *Always* proof your dog so that you are confident he will restart after an interruption.

Generally trackers train by themselves or with another person or two. When you show up at a test, however, suddenly there is a crowd of people, delicious food smells, and other dogs pottying everywhere. Will your dog focus on his track under these conditions? Proof your dog by inviting a group of tracking friends for a get-together. Put up the pop-up tents, put a pot luck picnic on the table, and everyone gets to track their dogs. What fun!

For VST trackers I would suggest you go one step further in people proofing your dogs. Have a friend walk the first leg of your track with you as you are plotting it and after a while have your friend turn away from the track as you continue forward laying the rest of the track. Your dog needs to take the scent from the start article and not be distracted by another individual even though that individual was at the start flag. On another occasion, have your friend walk beside you on the first leg as before but when she leaves this time have her walk directly across your path as she leaves. You should then continue forward as before and finish laying the rest of the track. On still another occasion have your friend walk the first leg with

you and both of you turn at the same time but in opposite directions. This will really test your dog's ability to follow the scent of the individual who dropped the start article.

Because of the highly polluted tracks that VST dogs need to work, people proofing your VST dog is a must. Have a friend periodically stand a little to the left of your track, or a little to the right of your track and proof your dog from becoming distracted by a person standing that near to their track. Have the person speak to you with just a friendly hello. When you feel your dog is ready for a bigger distraction, have the person ask you for directions. Stop your dog, give the directions, and then ask your dog to continue on the track. Also be sure to have someone stand directly *on* your track so that the dog must walk around them to continue tracking.

You also need to proof your dog against equipment issues before you are really ready to enter a test. Practice tracking the dog with you at the minimum distance on the lead behind him. Practice tracking him with you at the maximum distance as well. If the dog steps over his lead, practice stopping the dog to fix the lead. Be sure that he will restart after such an interruption. The next time it happens let him continue on with the lead running under his front leg or between his rear legs and see if it bothers him. I like to have a dog that will continue to track regardless of where the lead is located. My handling skills are better some days than others, and since I don't want to constantly stop my dog's forward momentum, I proof my dog to track with the lead between his legs. Speaking of iffy handling skills, I have a friend who sometimes forgets to attach the lead to the harness when her dog starts a track. Her dog will track with the lead attached to the collar. Will your dog?

You can proof for other equipment issues by dropping an extra article on the track, by dropping an article slightly off the track, by leaving a flag on the track, and by leaving a flag in the field that is *not* on the track. Don't let extra articles or flags distract your dog so that he cannot focus on the track. Accidents like these do indeed happen at tracking tests which is why it is worth your time to proof your dog against them.

One of the more important items to proof your dog against is the concept of "minimum requirements." Too many trackers train their TD dogs on 30 minute old tracks that are 440 yards long with 4 corners. Yes, your dog should be able to do this track. He should also be able to do a two hour old track that is 500 yards long with 5 turns before you enter a test. Unfortunately, there are many TDX trainers that are also guilty of training for the minimum requirements. They tend to enter a test as soon as their dog can do a three hour old track. Can you imagine how simple a three hour old track would seem to a dog that regularly runs five and six hour old tracks?

Can your dog track early in the day and track just as well at 2:00 pm? Will your dog track on a dry day with a strong wind? How about tracking in the rain? If you avoid exposing your dog to such conditions, you are training for the minimum your dog can do. Do you sometimes put in a track with a 250 yard leg? If you think this will never happen at a real test you have another thought coming. Remember to practice taking your dog out of the car and immediately walking him up to the start flag. Then practice walking him a *long* distance to the start flag in case the track you draw at a test happens to be located in the back of a large field with no access by car.

If your typical training day involves driving to the site, laying the track, returning to the car to age the track for 30-45 minutes and then running your dog, you need to practice having the dog wait in the car for several hours in case you draw the last track at a test. Also practice having him wait almost no time at all in case you draw track number one.

A truly green dog has issues all his own to deal with along with the issues mentioned already in this article. If the test is out of town, your young dog might be spending his first night in a hotel room. He might spend the entire night pacing the floor wondering when the two of you are going to go home so he can go to sleep. Needless to say, this is not the best way to attend your first tracking test. Try to take your green dog along on some other out of town trip a time or two before the tracking test so that this is not his first experience with sleeping away from home. Of course, a more simple solution to this problem is to enter a test within easy driving distance of your home. Yes, you will have to set the alarm for an early morning wake up but it would be better than spending a sleepless night with a nervous dog.

Green dogs sometimes need to be exposed to loud sounds like gunfire or firecrackers so that the loud noises do not distract them from tracking. Our tracking site was once taken over with a father-son hunt day. We moved our tracking test safely down the road, but not so far that the dogs could not occasionally hear gun shots. Who would have thought you would need to proof for that?

Proofing teaches your dog skills above and beyond the skills he would typically need. It helps assure that the actual tracking test will seem easy for your dog. Proof him sensibly and safely and be sure to reward your dog's efforts with praise and treats. Happy tracking!