

**To Flag Or Not To Flag  
That Is The Question  
By Rosemary Janoch**

When someone comes to me looking for guidance on how to start tracking with their dog I always suggest the individual get some flags so each track can be carefully marked. Invariably, the individual will come back to see me in a couple of weeks and tell me their dog is not tracking but rather is just running from flag to flag. This statement is generally followed by the very predictable statement “So I no longer use flags on my tracks.” Since folks in the Midwest can’t be all that different from the folks many of you are helping to track, let me suggest how you might reply to a student of yours that is reluctant to use flags to mark their tracks.

First, in my 30 years of tracking dogs I have only seen one dog that truly ran from flag to flag without actually tracking. And although all of us would like to believe our own dog is incredibly special, he probably isn’t. Our own dog is likely to be a run-of-the-mill normal dog and not that “one in a million” dog that can follow flags. In fact, I can put most *people* in a field with flags and even they can’t follow the track using the flags and the people are in the six foot tall range where they can clearly see the flags and not in the 24” tall range where most of the flags can’t be seen anyway. So just seeing flags doesn’t mean you would be able to figure out where the track goes.

The vast majority of people do not walk in a straight line. That is why people who get lost in the woods often find that after days of walking, they are right back where they started. We all have one hip, knee, or ankle that is not as strong as the other one is and so almost all of us will arc to one side or the other when we walk. Experienced trackers have many little tricks they have developed over the years to prevent the arcing, but beginners to the sport definitely need to use flags so that they clearly see where the track goes. They might believe they headed for the oak tree but the flags clearly show they are really headed toward the big pine to the left of the oak. What good could possibly come from correcting a dog for heading for the pine when we firmly believe the track is headed for the oak? Flags can prove to be indispensable for non-straight walking individuals.

Since the beginning stages of training involve using flags every ten or twenty paces, the dog could very likely see the next flag in the line and might be tempted to run to the next flag he sees. Most dogs will do this only if there is a reason to run to a flag. People who put articles at each flag or a cookie at each flag are inadvertently teaching their dog that a flag is significant and rewarding. I generally don’t teach my dogs to track with food so food drops at flags are not an issue for me. When I drop an article I usually drop it several feet after the final flag. So flags for my dogs have no meaning.

If you have accidentally taught your dog to pay attention to flags by dropping cookies and articles at the flags, the solution is not to remove the flags but rather to use so many flags that they once again become meaningless to the dog.

I know that good obedience trainers use this concept when a dog gets confused on an exercise. Say for example your dog is starting to drop on recall before you give the signal to drop. Some trainers would avoid the problem by doing many straight recalls during training and not dropping the dog at all except at a show. This strategy might work for a few shows but I don’t believe it is really helping the dog to understand the exercise. Why not do many straight

recalls interspersed with many drops until the dog has been helped to see the difference between the two exercises?

If my utility dog wants to do his go out to the spot where he just picked up a glove, I don't stop doing the glove exercise before the go-out. I just toss gloves all over the ring and send my dog to his go-out location and make it clear to him that when I say "Look" he is to focus on the stanchion on the opposite side of the ring and not be gawking at all the gloves that are on the floor.

So the point I want to make is to not avoid the problem by removing the flags from the track but rather to put dozens of flags out there in the field so that the sight of a flag is irrelevant to the dog. Won't that be a good thing for the time a tracklayer accidentally leaves a flag out in the field on test day?

If you truly believe you have one of those special dogs that run to the next flag instead of tracking, try putting in the track in Figure 1. It is a simple TD track that allows the dog to continue forward if he simply wants to run to the next flag in the line and ignore the first turn. At the first turn he can see a flag 50 yards to the right and 50 yards to the left which again tests his commitment to the track rather than to the flags. If you look at Figure 2 you will see the field through the dog's eyes. There are simply a bunch of flags in the field that are equally spaced 50 yards apart. I think you will find your dog does the track and ignores the flags. Flip the track in Figure 1 around and use the mirror image of it to practice your dog's flag awareness on a different day.

So what's the big deal with flags anyway? Why would we want to use them at all? The answer to this question is simple: Because we need them.

We want to always use the two flags at the start of the track to acclimate our dog to the sight picture the dog will see at a tracking test. We want to use flags along the way so that we can concentrate on reading our dog's body language and not have to concentrate on figuring out where the track goes. We want to use flags not only at the corners but also randomly placed along the legs of the track to keep us from arcing or wandering between corners. These intermediate flags can also be placed to warn us of an upcoming hazard like a well hidden gopher hole that we don't want to step in. Intermediate flags also help to build our confidence in our dog as we watch him track within inches of the flag. We know for certain he is dead on the track at that point and it gives us the opportunity to study his tracking posture and to praise him.

As my dog's tracking skills improve and I begin serious TDX training, I continue to use flags (or other markers like brightly colored clothespins) to mark the tracks because the cover is getting more challenging for my dog. I train woods regularly and I always will mark the entrance and exit from any substantial woods I am walking through. If the woods are wide open I will use flags to mark the track. If the trees are dense, I tend to clip clothespins on the branches. But either way the track is clearly marked.

If you have difficulty remembering whether a flag is a corner flag or just an intermediate flag, try getting different colored flags. Use one color flag to mean a corner, another color to indicate an article, and still another color to just mean "keep on going" for those really long legs. I do the same thing with the brightly colored clothespins. All of my clothespins are spray painted in blaze orange so that I can see them at a distance, but I tie a colored streamer of cloth on each clothespin so I know what is about to happen. Clothespins with a blaze orange piece of cloth hanging from them just mean I am on the track. I might use many of these to keep me on the track as I move through the woods. I hang one every few yards on the branch of a tree to keep

me going in a straight line. When I see a clothespin coming up that has a bright yellow streamer on it I know the dog is coming up to an article. A pink streamer means we are at a turn.

Flags can also help you meet new people and educate the public on your favorite sport. I have had many people stop me in the park and ask me what I am doing when they see me putting flags into the ground. They are fascinated to find out that there are people really training for this sport and often stand around long enough to watch me run the track with my dog. When they start asking you if there are any tracking classes they could take with their own dog, you know you have them hooked!

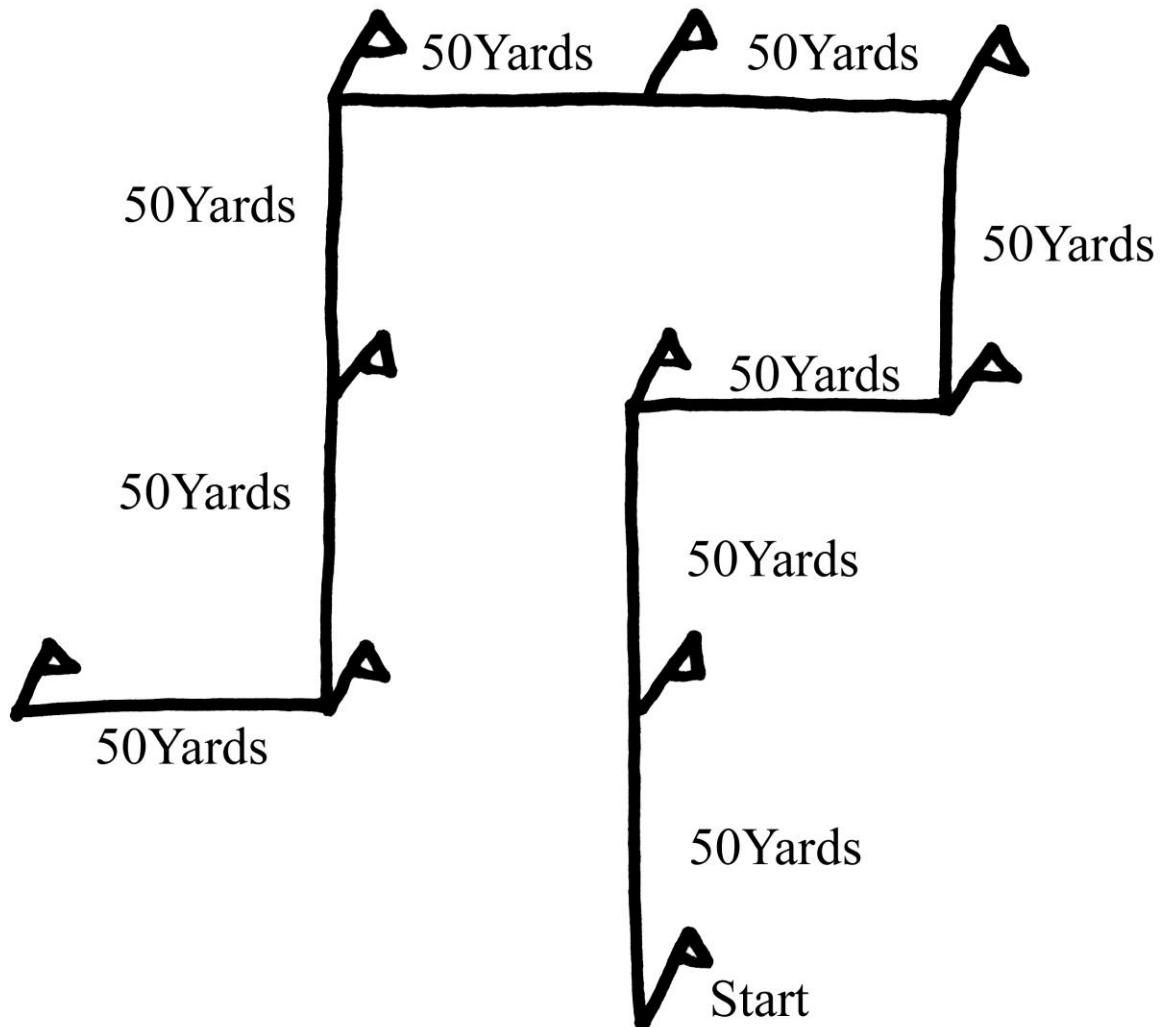
So when would you *not* want to use flags? There are three times that I can think of. The natural one that most people would think of first is if you want to run a blind track. It is always good to run a blind track to test your ability to read your dog before entering a test. This would mean a blind track at each level of tracking. You should successfully run a blind TD track before you phone a tracking judge to certify your dog. You should be able to do the same successful blind track at the TDX and VST level before you enter your dog in one of the advanced tests.

The second occasion where I would not use a flag to mark the track would be if I were getting ready to run a blind track. With a green dog, I don't generally take all the flags away at once and just run a blind track with him. I will have someone put in a track with all the flags present except the one that marks the final article. If the dog and I do that track successfully then I might ask for a track with all the flags there except for the article flag and the flag on the last turn. Now I am letting the dog and me settle in to the track by doing several turns before running the end of the track blind. I gradually let all the flags disappear except for the flag on the first turn. An amazing number of dogs are wild at the start of a track and then settle down after they have made that first turn so that is the last turn marker I am willing to give up. When I give up that last flag, I am ready to get my dog certified.

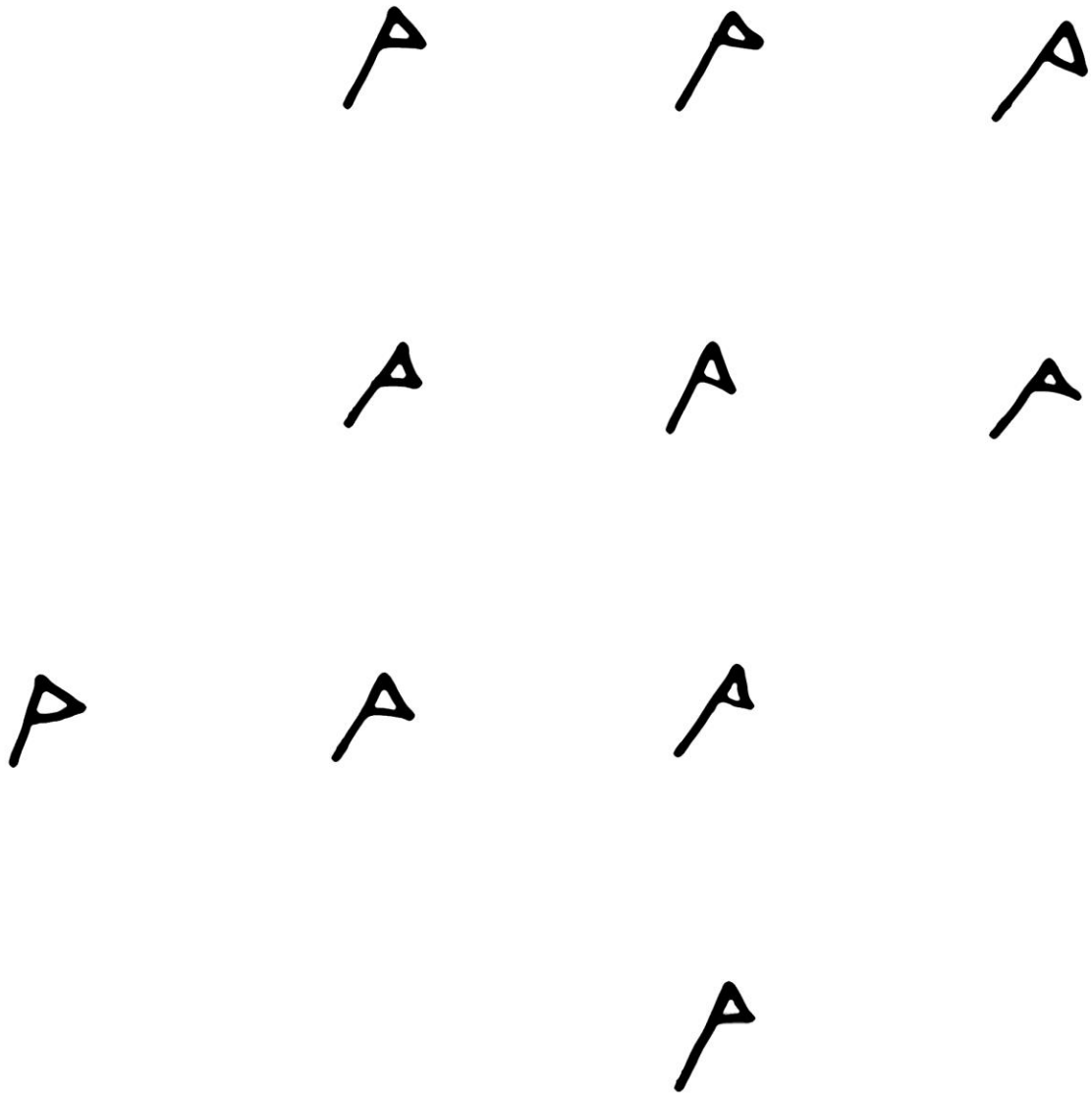
The final instance where I don't use flags is when Mother Nature has given me an unmistakable ground marker and a flag is simply not needed to mark the turn. Be careful with this technique, however, as I have seen it backfire. A good friend I track with once told me she thought her Springer was getting wise to the flags and so she did not put a flag at one turn in her track where an obvious clump of grass was located. She said there was no way she could miss that clump and so she didn't need a flag there. And she thought this would be a good test for her dog. Would he turn at the clump or just keep going? Needless to say, when she ran the track 30 minutes later she was confused when her dog was pulling her off in a new direction and she was trying to get him to go to the next flag she saw. I mentioned that he seemed to be trying to drag her toward a clump of grass in the distance. I won't repeat the words she said right then but she did indeed follow her dog to the clump and has been faithfully using flags on her tracks every since.

It has been reported that the Navy SEALs took a dog with them when they raided the compound of Osama bin Laden. Although these young men are in the prime of their mental and physical condition, they need help with the one sense we know so little about: the sense of smell. If bin Laden had hid in a secret compartment in a wall or beneath the floorboards in one of the rooms it might have take the Navy SEALs hours to find him. And time was something they did not have a lot of. It would take the dog mere minutes to locate him.

If we keep in mind that humans explore the world around them with their eyes and that dogs explore the world with their noses, then it is clear that we use the flags because *we* need the flags. The dogs couldn't care less.



**Figure 1:** If you suspect your dog is running to the next flag he sees without tracking, lay the above track with all flags spaced 50 yards apart. Your dog will now have many choices if he is just running to flags. If he runs the track accurately, you know the flags are insignificant to him.



**Figure 2:** This is the same track in Figure 1. Here you can see why it is so difficult for a person to tell where the track goes even with flags clearly visible!