



## **Tracking Seminars**

By Rosemary Janoch

Since I am a retired school teacher it will probably not come as a surprise to you that I am a strong supporter of lifelong education. Throughout the years I have attended seminars on grooming, canine behavior, agility, obedience training, field work, and, of course, tracking. Most of the seminars were good ones with a few of them being truly outstanding. I didn't let the couple of stinkers I went to dissuade me from attending additional seminars. If you have never attended a tracking seminar or if your club has never hosted a tracking seminar, please consider some of the following points.

Attending a tracking seminar can expose you to new training techniques. I had never seen serpentine tracks used to teach a beginner dog to track until I attended a seminar. I still don't use this method to start my new dogs but it is a valuable tool I now have in my bag of tricks in case I run across a dog that needs it. Different seminars might also expose you to various "article" games that encourage the dog to readily and definitively indicate articles (see photos below).



Photo on the left: Seminars often play article games with attendees to increase the dog's interest in finding an article.

Photo on the right: When the dog finds an article the handler needs to praise the dog and make a fuss over his discovery.

Attending a seminar out of town exposes you to regional differences regarding how things are done. One of the biggest differences I have noticed is in regard to how cross tracks are put in. On plotting day, judges in the Midwest regularly have one of the cross track layers walk along on the main track while it is being plotted. Often, the cross track layer carries the flags so that the judges and the track layer have their hands free to draw maps. However, many areas of the country would never dream of having a cross track layer on the main track. Comparing AKC pass rates across the country has convinced me that the dogs don't care one way or another. I have even seen the cross tracks actually *walked* on plotting day. It was simply another regional difference.

Learning about new rule changes in the sport, meeting new friends, making new contacts, and renewing old friendships are all good reasons for attending a seminar but one of the reasons that most influences me to attend seminars is the opportunity to watch other breeds of dogs track and to watch how other individuals handle those tracking dogs. Just as you can learn a great deal about handling an obedience dog by watching the Open B and Utility B classes at a show, or learn how to handle a field dog by watching one handler after another walk their dogs to the line, you can most definitely learn how to handle a tracking dog by watching what works, and doesn't work, with other dogs. If your Golden Retriever quarters extensively, watch how the handler tracks her wide-ranging Irish Setter. If your dog is overly sensitive about his environment, watch how the handler works with her little Sheltie who is a "worrier". The more you watch other breeds track, the better your handling becomes with your own dog. And the more you watch other handlers communicate with their tracking dogs, the more likely it is that you will develop a clear, consistent handling method of your own.

Seminars are great for familiarizing you with new grounds. Some seminars are held at the same site as the club's tracking test which means you not only get the chance to see what type of grounds the club uses but you also get the opportunity to actually train your dog on those grounds (see photo 3). This is especially important if you are leaving your local area and entering a test in the hills of Pennsylvania or on the sandy soil out west. Attending such a seminar gives your dog the chance to acclimate to the new scenting conditions and terrain before he is expected to perform under the pressure of an actual test.



Photo 3: This photo was taken at a Buckeye Tracking Club seminar last spring. This is also the site for the fall BTC tracking tests so many dogs had the opportunity to track on the test grounds.

Some seminars offer working spots and auditor spots and generally there is a price difference. Whether I want to pay the extra cost for the working spot or not would probably depend on my dog. I would want a working spot if I had a specific problem I wanted the seminar presenter to see. If there is an open question and answer session at the seminar, you might hear really good suggestions not only from the seminar presenter but also from many of the experienced trackers who are in attendance at the seminar, have watched your problem child track, and might have faced that same problem in the past with a dog of their own. Some of these attendees might be AKC tracking judges who could share their insights on the problem from watching dogs track all over the country. Some of these judges might be willing to certify a young dog at a tracking seminar, not only because it helps the person seeking to get a dog certified but because it also helps newcomers to the sport to watch a tracking dog in action.

I would also want a working spot if I had a new dog I was just starting. Having multiple sets of eyes watch your new dog track can help you avoid potential pitfalls like putting food drops on a track for a dog that is highly motivated by the article or walking a straight line for the dog who needs to have a serpentine track. Bringing a new dog to a seminar often helps you get that youngster off to a good start.

It is essential that you choose a seminar that is appropriate for your needs so whether you want a working spot or an auditor spot would also be influenced by the focus of the seminar and the level of your dog's training. Either way, whether I had a working spot or an auditing spot, I have found attending a seminar motivates me to go home and track my dog. So many times we are reminded that tracking is all about motivation and so we concentrate on ways to motivate our dogs. We forget that sometimes we need to be motivated as well.

If your own club is debating whether to hold a tracking seminar, let me mention a couple of benefits that might convince your club to take the leap. Firstly, of course, a seminar can generate income for the club. But more importantly, the seminar can generate camaraderie among your club's membership and generate a roster of potential workers. Once you bring new people into the sport by holding a tracking seminar, you have created a pool of workers for future events. In the process of doing something educational for the general public, you have benefited your own club with a dose of fresh blood by finding future track layers, cross track layers, drivers, hospitality chairs, and even future judges.

I still remember the first tracking seminar I ever attended. It was sponsored by Buckeye Tracking Club. I attended the seminar with my first purebred dog, a Rough Collie who had recently earned her UD title, and my new Golden Retriever puppy named Dune. I never did get around to tracking my collie but Dune became the first in a long line of TDX Goldens that over the years convinced me to become an AKC tracking judge...and all because I attended a tracking seminar.

The impact and importance of seminars is clear. I encourage you to attend tracking seminars when you can and to encourage your club to sponsor tracking seminars on a regular basis.