



Training at the Test Site

By Rosemary Janoch

I judged a tracking test recently and three of the exhibitors entered in the test trained together at the tracking site the previous weekend. This got me thinking about the pros and cons of training at a test site. It also got me thinking that very likely most folks are more knowledgeable about the pros than they are about the cons. Then *that* got me thinking I better write an article about it, so here goes.

Anytime you have the opportunity to acclimate a dog to the vegetation and ground conditions of a locale where you want the dog to track the odds of the dog passing the test are improved. I have mentioned this before for those of you who travel great distances to enter tracking tests. Many of you even travel out of state. In those cases, even if all you can do is walk the dog around the motel grounds and let him sniff the local ground cover, it is better than nothing. If you could actually run a practice track at the park where the test is being held, that would be even better. However, if the tracking fields are local and you can go out there to track your dog on a number of occasions you would definitely have the “home court advantage” over those dogs coming in to the test from out of town.

Field trainers know the concept of “home court advantage” well. The dogs that train in the fields and ponds where the tests are held have a definite leg up over those dogs that have never

seen the site and are therefore unfamiliar with that scary floating log in the middle of the big pond.

Local trackers experience a similar advantage since they know the track in the south field can't go left into the woods since the woods are on private property and the owner has complained several times about the dogs in his woods and now everyone knows not to go in there. Everyone knows, of course, except the handlers who come in from out of town. If their dogs pull them toward those woods, they would naturally follow their dogs. Local trainers on the other hand might tighten their hold on their leads and ask the dogs to recheck the direction of the track. Is this a home-court advantage? Absolutely. Might it help a local dog to pass? Definitely.

So it certainly sounds like training on the test site is a great idea...and it is as long as you are aware of a few potential pitfalls. Take field training again as an example because field trainers certainly know how easy it is to get into trouble training on the show grounds. For example, if a dog struggles with a blind and is trained on it over and over again during the course of several sessions until he does the blind flawlessly then no one is surprised when test day rolls around and the test blind is planted 40 yards to the left of the blind location the dog has been training on for the last several weeks. Gee, what a surprise when the dog goes to the old blind and the handler can't get him off of it! This situation could certainly convince you that training on the show site is perhaps not the fabulous idea you first thought it was.

The same concept applies to training on the tracking grounds. If you make a turn into the woods in the same location too many times, then don't be surprised when your dog hesitates to enter the woods at a new location you have never used. If you *always* cross that cute little bridle path because you think it is fun for your dog, don't be shocked when he shoots right over the path even though the judges turned 15 yards *before* the bridle path. Training on the show grounds too often can lead to problems like these where both you and your dog are trying to second guess the layout of the track. In fact, these problems are compounded when the club brings in out of town judges who don't know where the tracks are generally placed. They will look at the fields with new eyes and put in tracks that may surprise you if you have a preconceived notion of where the track will go.

Depending on the type of vegetation in the fields, tracks can be visible to a handler. I have been thrilled many times to see one of my dogs circle at a corner and then take off down a new leg with a good strong pull and when I round the corner I see a lovely visible path straight ahead of me. It gives me a lot of confidence in my dog and puts a little extra spring in my step. Imagine, however, if there are many visible tracks going in a variety of directions because various trackers have been using those fields to train on in the weeks leading up to the test. Now instead of making you more confident, the visible tracks might confuse you and make you a little nervous. Every time your dog chooses to follow one of those paths you might suspect he has gotten himself on to a deer trail or is taking a cross track. If everyone chose to stay off of the fields for a couple of weeks before a test, the fields would have an opportunity to recover from past use and be a bit more pristine for test day.

You can also get into trouble training on the site too close to the date of the test because dogs have been known to follow very old tracks. I experienced this personally with my third TDX dog, Dillon, who was a tracking fanatic and earned his TDX title on his first attempt at 17 months of age. The track layer for our TDX test was a very dear woman who came out to the test site the week before the test to train her own dog. She happened to use the same field to train her dog in that Dillon's track was in on test day. Now to set the picture for you, let me tell you that Dillon was *really* fast and accurate. He took corners like he was on rails. When I clicked the lead

to his harness at the start flag he took off like he was shot from a cannon. In fact, one of the judges fell trying to keep up with us as Dillon flew through the track. Then everything came to a grinding halt on the final leg. Dillon stopped halfway down that leg and started casting left and right. He checked the woods to our left and then crossed the road to our right to smell the opposite side. He came back and fussed around some more before finally continuing forward to find his glove. It took Dillon 15 minutes to complete that TDX track and almost half of that time was spent on the final leg. After the judges shook my hand and departed to judge the next dog, the track layer came up to congratulate me and to say she was so excited to see Dillon acknowledge the exact spot where she came out of the woods and crossed the street when training her dog the previous weekend. Now keep in mind that a TDX dog is supposed to ignore a cross track. But that is not what Dillon was sorting out. He blew past the cross tracks on earlier legs in this track but stopped dead when he found evidence that the track layer *herself* had gone in another direction. The AKC regulations permit training on the site the week before a test, but just because you *can* do something doesn't mean you *should*.

Imagine the confusion you could cause your own dog if the practice field you used to train him in the week before a test is the same field you draw on test day. You are now expecting your dog to ignore *your* track (even though it is old) in favor of following a stranger's track. Some dogs will do this but many will not. In fact, the AKC regulations prohibit anyone from laying a track for you at a test if they have walked a track for your dog in the last 30 days. This ruling clearly acknowledges the fact that a dog will more willingly follow a familiar scent than an unfamiliar scent. Personally, I just don't see the sense in taking that risk.

So although many tracking sites are off limits to trainers except on test day, there are many sites that are open to the public year round and can be used for training. My suggestion to you would be to use the opportunity to train on the test site wisely. Don't overdo it by training there too often. Don't lay predictable tracks. Be thoughtful and courteous to all the other exhibitors by not using the fields too close to test day. Remember that the most effective trainers are the ones who use a variety of locations so that their dogs hone their skills independent of the fields in which they are trained. Happy and safe tracking to you all.