



Training Woods

By Rosemary Janoch

There are some tracking dogs that seem to handle scenting conditions in woods with no help from us at all. Most dogs, however, need multiple experiences with tracks of all ages and under all conditions before they become confident, reliable trackers in woods. Of course, there are handlers that simply hope they will get lucky and have no woods on their TDX track. Having been one of those handlers, and having thereby failed a few TDX tracks because of poorly trained dogs that could not do woods, I now find that I don't need to rely on luck. The harder and smarter I train, the luckier I seem to get. So here in a nutshell is how I train my dogs to track in the woods.

I start every one of my dogs tracking with the *certainty* that this new dog will earn a TDX title. Each new dog, therefore, is trained with the TDX requirements in mind. As the dog moves along in his training, he is first shown how to pass through an open hedgerow from one field into another field. After a while, I stop putting the track through the opening and start laying the track right through the hedgerow. The dog then graduates to a narrow tree line that is only a few yards in width, and finally to a small stand of open trees. At this point, I am ready to get serious about training woods.

As in all training, make it easy to begin with and encourage the dog with success. I often start by simply putting a few yards of woods at the end of a TD track that I am laying for my dog. I would use woods that are relatively open and drop the glove only a few yards in. Don't put too much age on the track when trying woods for the first time. Using this technique, my dogs come to look at woods as a reward for a job well done. They have tracked through the field and now get to go into the woods and pick up the glove. Rather than dreading or avoiding woods as do some dogs, my dogs tend to track into woods with enthusiasm.

Keep in mind when you begin training woods that you are teaching multiple skills at once and so you must be patient with your dog as he figures out and perfects each of the new skills. For instance, he needs to handle the changing scent conditions that result from moving from sunlight into shade. If you come out the other side, he then needs to deal with moving from shade to sun. He needs to deal with the swirling air currents created by the tree line. He is simultaneously learning to handle the many little obstacles in the woods that can range from walking over tiny branches to tripping over vines to getting his line wrapped around trees.

Your dog is not the only one who must develop new skills. You need to learn to watch for your dog's turn indications while negotiating the woods for yourself. You will be stepping over

branches, fallen limbs, streams, and decaying logs. At the same time, you will be ducking under branches and keeping the lead from wrapping around tree trunks. If you take your eyes off of your dog to do any of this, however, you risk missing a subtle turn indication. You thereby risk pushing your dog deeper into the woods when he really told you he had lost the track!

Even on short little tracks into the woods, I lay the foundation for what I expect of a finished, experienced tracking dog. In an open field, for instance, I do not allow my dogs to wildly swing from one side of the track to the other. I make no excuses for wind or terrain, but instead ask my dog to track precisely *on* the track instead of just in the general vicinity of the track.

Consequently, when I track in the woods I do not allow the dog to run willy-nilly around all the trees tangling the lead and aggravating the handler. I mark my tracks in the woods with brightly colored clothespins and I keep the dog right on the track. If I walked to the left of a large tree, I do not allow the dog to track to the right of it. I consistently demand that the dog stay on the footprints of the track through the woods. If my dog goes to the wrong side of a tree, I stop and wait for him to come back around and I continue forward only when he has returned to the exact track I walked. Asking for this type of tracking is easier than getting it. It requires a controlled steady pace, a very short lead, and lots of patience. If you are consistent in your expectations, however, your dog will comply with your wishes.

To be sure I know where I walked in the woods, I use the wooden spring clothespins that can be bought at almost any store. The plastic clothespins break too easily so I don't use them. Hang the wooden clothespins outside on a clothesline and spray them with white paint to form a good base coat. When the first coat of spray paint is dry, spray the clothespins a second time with a bright color that will readily show up in the woods like blaze orange. You can increase their visibility by tying a streamer of colored tape or colored fabric to each clothespin. I use different colors to tell me what is happening on the track. Most of my markers have blaze orange streamers and are used simply to keep me on the track. I use a clothespin with a yellow streamer to indicate an article. I use two clothespins to indicate a turn.

I use the clothespins because many of the natural markers that you might be tempted to use in the woods change dramatically as time elapses. If you look at the woods and decide to enter at the "bright green tree" which is very distinctive at the time you are laying the track, you might be greatly surprised to find that your tree is indistinguishable from the other trees when you return to run the track. In my opinion, one tree looks way too much like another. That is why I rely on the clothespins.

Even if you have not asked your dog to stay exactly on the track in an open field, you can still ask for it in the woods but it may take a while for the new concept to sink in. You will have to ask yourself "How far off the track am I willing to let my dog be? What am I willing to tolerate?" Keep in mind that it is awfully easy to miss an article in the woods if your dog is not directly on the track. Judges have been known to drop an article next to a large tree or beside a large boulder in the woods because it is an easy landmark to remember. If the article is on the right side of the boulder and your dog takes you past the left side, there is a chance that neither one of you will notice the article. That fact alone should encourage you to train your dog to stay very close to the actual track.

Turns in the woods seem to present the greatest difficulty for a tracking team and I believe the majority of the problems stem from handling issues. Because it is difficult to let a dog cast for a turn in the woods the same way the dog would cast for the turn in an open field, we need to use a great deal of patience and practice the many scenarios that could occur at a test. Each of the following situations should be practiced until neither you nor your dog has an issue with it:

- Track towards the woods and go directly in
- Track towards the woods and make a right turn in front of the woods (do not enter the woods)
- Track towards the woods and make a left turn in front of the woods (do not enter the woods)
- Track towards the woods on a diagonal and enter the woods on a diagonal
- Track parallel to the woods for a while and then make a right turn into the woods
- Track parallel to the woods for a while and then make a left turn into the woods
- Make a turn shortly after entering the woods
- Make a turn after going a long way in the woods
- Make no turn at all in the woods and simply come out the other side

I think many handlers neglect teaching their dogs how to make a turn shortly after entering the woods. Many times when plotting a track for a test, the judges use a promising spot to enter the woods only to find that once they enter there is a huge ravine in the woods, or a “No Trespassing” sign in the woods, or horrendous thorn bushes, etc. which puts the judges in a position of needing to make an immediate turn to avoid the problem area. This happens often enough that handlers should prepare their dogs accordingly. This means that your dog is *not* permitted to enter the woods at full speed since there might be a turn within the first few yards. Keep in mind that the AKC rules have no yardage requirements between an obstacle (the woods) and a turn. That is why tracks can turn immediately in front of the woods or immediately inside of the woods. Do not develop a preconceived notion of how far the judges must walk in the woods before the track turns. That kind of thinking is dangerous.

As you train your dog to track through woods, be sure to vary the experiences so that they include climbing over fallen trees (small ones at first), crossing creeks and ravines, tracking through pine forests with pine mulch to walk on, and through woods filled with deciduous trees that provide a footing of deep leaf cover. Practice tracking through obstacles like ravines and streams and also practice turning directly in front of them. Ravines, in particular, can be a trap for a dog. Even if the track layer turned before the ravine, the track scent might have rolled down into the ravine and can draw the dog down. It takes an experienced dog to take his handler back out of the ravine and relocate the track. Dogs also need to track through woods that have grass, bare dirt, bridle paths, and May apples. Expose your dog to as many different situations in woods as possible and then nothing will bother him at an actual test.

Don’t forget to train articles in the woods. Place your articles to help the beginner dog by putting them only a few yards into the woods. Let your dog receive an immediate reward for entering the woods. Gradually make your dog track farther into the woods before getting his reward. If you see a particularly difficult spot in the woods like a stream crossing that is fairly wide, place an article shortly after the crossing to reward your dog for making the effort. If your dog is not particularly enthusiastic about articles, food can be used as a reward for successfully managing difficult areas in the woods.

I enjoy tracking in woods in the winter when the trees have lost their leaves and I can see where I am going. If there is snow on the ground, I don’t even have to use the clothespins. Summer tracking in the woods, however, can provide your dog with a cooler option than tracking in an open field under a very warm sun. I would caution you, though, about tracking in the evening after you get home from work. If you age the track just a little too long and the sun begins to set before you are finished, the woods will get *very dark very fast*. Use your common

sense and abandon a track if night is falling. It is easy to trip and fall in the woods in broad daylight, so it is certainly no place to be at night.

The AKC tracking regulations say that you may track closer than the 20 foot minimum when you are approaching an obstacle like a road, fence, or dense, difficult cover. Take advantage of this ruling and get close to your dog in the woods. Shorten the lead so that he cannot wrap himself around twelve trees at one time. You might try tying a knot at the ten foot mark on your lead if that is a convenient length for you to work your dog in the woods. As the dog approaches woods and seems like he is going to enter, walk up the lead to the 10 foot knot and hold on to it tightly as the two of you enter the woods. If the lead should happen to get away from you, however, and your dog wraps himself around multiple trees, you need to use your “wait” command to stop his motion. Now comes the really hard part. You need to be able to return to the track after you are finished untangling your dog. Do you know where the track is? Are you currently standing on the track? If so, then you need to take a good look around you and be able to work your way back to that exact spot to help your dog reconnect with the track. If this situation develops at an actual tracking test, you might be in woods that are strange to you. Nothing looks familiar and all the trees look the same. This happened to me once. I asked the judges if I could untangle my dog. They answered with a yes and so I took off the hat I was wearing and dropped it at my feet. After freeing my dog, I went back to pick up my hat and knew I was back on the track. My dog earned his TDX title only a few yards later when he picked up the glove. In fact, his wild running around all the trees was “article search” behavior. He had caught a whiff of the article and went into serious search mode which wrapped him around multiple trees in a matter of seconds. It was only after he presented me with the article that I understood the cause of his wild behavior. Fortunately, no harm was done since I could get him back on the track.

If you keep in mind a few pointers like shortening your lead, slowing your pace, training for a variety of circumstances, and training a “wait” command for when the dog is tangled or you are negotiating an obstacle, you should find that tracking in woods is a delightful experience. Have fun with it!