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What if...?

I had a funny thing happen at an obedience trial two weeks ago. The judge had just finished examining my dog during the moving stand and said “Call your dog.” I started with “Brinks...” and then stopped because Brinks had sat down and was busy scratching behind his ear. When he was done scratching, I finished his command to come to heel. We failed because there was a huge 15 second pause between his name and the command to finish. Had I thought a little faster on my feet, I would have given the complete command of “Brinks, heel!” and then let the cards fall where they may. He either would have finished scratching himself and then come to heel or he wouldn’t have. But at least then the ball would have been in his court. I blew it for the two of us by delaying my command.

I wasn’t ready for the “What if my dog starts to scratch right when I start to give a command?” scenario. Because I had not planned on having this happen, I didn’t know what to do when it occurred. What I would like to do for you in this article is present some of the “What ifs” that can happen when you are at a tracking test. If you know what to do ahead of time, the presence of the judges and the pressure of the test won’t throw you off.

- What if you get lost on the way to the test? Premium lists generally have a cell phone number that can be used the morning of the test to reach the test chairperson. Call and let her know you are lost but are on your way. If an alternate is present, however, they will be allowed to draw for a track instead of you and you will be out of luck. If no alternate is present, the secretary will draw for you if you miss the draw. The catch is, however, that you need to show up before it is time to run your track. I suggest you try to find the site the night before so you don’t get lost and you know how long it will take you to get there from the hotel. However, if you get a flat tire or have something else delay you, you may simply be out of luck for running your dog in the test. It is your responsibility to be there on time.
- What if my dog picks up an extra article on the track? For example, your dog might find a glove or a hat on the second leg of the track. Just pick it up, put it in your pocket, praise your dog for being so very clever, and tell your dog to “Go find!” Hopefully you have practiced restarts on your training tracks so that your dog will continue tracking.
- What if you see a flag in the middle of the field? Ignore it and continue tracking your dog. A flag left in the field by the track layer will not invalidate your track.
- What if I can *see* where the track goes? This is not a problem unless you try to guide your dog. Rarely can you see an entire track from beginning to end, but it is very common to be able to see a leg or two due to the type of vegetation the judges walked through. Let your dog use his nose to do his thing and don’t try to influence him. When tracks are visible, judges are very aware of the temptation handlers have to guide the dog and they will be on the lookout for any funny business.
- What if my dog has to relieve himself after we have started the track? This is not an uncommon occurrence so don’t panic. In fact, many times a dog is totally distracted and

doesn't seem able to track and the problem is simply that the dog has something other than tracking on his mind. Let him do his business and then command "Go find!" Your dog should restart with no problem once the potty issue is over. Generally, you don't need to pick it up out in the middle of a big field, but if it is a VST track and you are in a well manicured area, the poop will need to be picked up. Good hearted track layers will usually do it for you so be sure to thank them for going above and beyond the call of duty!

- What if you see something dangerous directly ahead of you? Immediately stop and turn around to inform the judges of the situation. I once saw a pair of judges walk a man and his dog in a big arc away from a huge (and I do mean *huge*) black snake that was aggressively coiled on the track. The judges put the man back on the track on the far side of the snake and told the handler to continue from there. I have also seen this done when a skunk was sunning herself on the track. They all walked a big arc around her and continued the track farther down.
- What if my bitch comes in season the morning of the test? For this answer you will have to consult the premium list. Some tests allow a bitch in season to compete but she will be kept off the test grounds until she needs to run and she will be given the last track of the day. Some tests do not permit bitches in season to participate and in that case I would try to get in touch with the trial secretary as soon as possible in case there is an alternate who could be contacted in time so that dog could run in the test.
- What if a storm moves in while I am on the track? Since tracking is an outdoor activity, be prepared for anything Mother Nature wants to throw at you. However, in the case of severe weather like thunder and lightning it is likely the judges will tell you not to run. They may delay the test for a short time if the storm looks like it is going to blow over.
- What if my dog is allergic to bees? May I carry emergency medicine on my person? In the case of medicine (for you or the dog), I would simply inform the judges before you begin the track. I cannot imagine a single judge anywhere that would object to you having it on you. The rules say that anyone may carry water on the track. No food or toys may be on you while you are tracking so empty your pockets of all goodies before starting.
- What if you discover you left your harness and lead at home? First, immediately look around for anyone at the test with a dog approximately the same size as yours. Then pray they will let you borrow their equipment.
- What if you discover that your dog is tracking on his collar and you never actually attached the lead to his harness? If the dog was doing fine, I would probably just let him continue to track on his collar. If he looked like he was having a hard time, I would probably stop for a water break and casually clip the tracking lead to the harness while my dog was drinking the water. Do this subtly so the judges don't notice what a dork you are.
- What if you are going through some tough cover and the lead gets terribly tangled in the vegetation? I suggest you turn to the judges and let them know you are going to untangle your dog. If your dog has a reliable stay command, I would put the dog in a sit or down while I pull the lead free. You don't want the dog to continue to tangle more of the lead while you are working on the section of lead that is already tangled. Nor do you want the dog to try to pull you down the track while you are busy getting the lead free from the vegetation. A stay command is really valuable here. I do know of one handler who carries

a spare tracking lead in her bag and when the lead gets hopelessly tangled, she simply unclips it and clips on a fresh lead and continues on. When the track is over, she goes back and works on untangling the original lead.

- What if your lead breaks while you are tracking? If the clip at the end broke, tie the lead to the D-ring and be sure to use a good sturdy knot that is not going to come loose. If the lead snapped in half, stop your dog, gather the two pieces together and knot them together as well as you can. Or snap on a new lead if you carry a spare in your bag.
- What if someone, like a hiker, starts to talk to you on the track? I would briefly explain my dog is in the middle of a test and is being judged and would politely excuse myself and tell my dog to continue to track. I know you are nervous at a test, but try not to just ignore the person. Someone told me his dog was crossing a road and a driver stopped and asked him for directions. The handler gave the driver directions and then continued on the track. You will not be failed for talking to someone. Nor will you be given a new track just because a random hiker is walking through your field.
- What if the track passes close to a body of water and your dog jumps in for a little dip? You can't really drag him out of there, but you certainly do need a command that says "Quit fooling around and get back to tracking!" You won't fail because your dog jumped in for a swim, but you will fail if you can't get him back on task relatively quickly.
- What if a loose dog comes running across the field at you and your dog? If the dog is friendly and just wants to play with your dog, the track layer or the judges will usually try to step in and shoo the dog away or hook the dog up to a spare lead and get it away from your dog so that you can continue. Sometimes, you can just say "Go away...shoo!" and the dog might leave on his own. If the loose dog looks and sounds like it is aggressive, however, you are in a nightmare situation. If I had a little dog, I would try to pick it up and call to the judges for help. At that point in time, I am no longer worried about a tracking title. I have a much bigger concern. With a bigger dog like a Lab or a Golden, I would tell my dog to sit-stay and position myself between my dog and the dog that is approaching us. Use your best "don't mess with me" voice and tell the dog to go away. Surprisingly, some of these loose dogs are trained and you might be able to forcefully command "Down!" and stop the dog from coming any closer. Fortunately, loose dogs coming at you during a test are few and far between, although I have had this happen to me while training.
- What if I drop the lead and my dog is continuing to track without me? I guess I don't have the strongest grip in the world, so this has actually happened to me twice. The first time it happened, I was much younger and I ran like crazy after my dog and picked up the lead on the fly. I don't think my dog even noticed I dropped it. When it happened many years later, I simply told my dog to sit and I walked up to him and picked the lead back up.
- What if the judges lose sight of me and my dog? Should I keep going? The answer to this question is: it depends. This really doesn't happen very often with a TD dog, but it is a real concern on a TDX track with heavy cover and thick woods. If my dog and I have gained a lot of ground on the judges and are in danger of leaving them in the dust, I slow down a bit and perhaps offer my dog a water break which gives the judges time to catch up. If, however, I have completely lost sight of them and they have lost sight of me, I keep moving along the track. Most judges will move to the location of the next article if they totally lose sight of the exhibitor. If the next article is already gone, the judges will

assume you have already been there and left the location and will hurry along to catch up with you. If the next article is still there on the ground, the judges will likely stay at that location and wait for you to show up or will attempt to backtrack to find you. Judges certainly don't try to lose you on purpose, but random things happen that delay them. For example, an elderly judge fell in the field and the second judge stopped to help him up. It only took a few minutes to get the judge back on his feet and walking again, but the dog and handler were moving quickly and they were in thick cover. The two judges lost sight of the team and it took quite a bit of time to determine that the team had made an incorrect turn while the two judges were busy. The team was now far off the track and in a completely different direction than where the judges were looking. In fact, the team circled around and ended back up at the test headquarters. I give the dog a lot of credit for using his nose and leading his owner back to the food!

- What if I need to ask the judges a question after I have started my track? The time to ask questions is before you start, but handlers will sometimes ask if they can give their dog water, or ask if they can untangle the dog's lead. Do *not* ask the judges questions like "Am I still on the track?" or "Is this one of the articles?" since no answers to those types of questions will be forthcoming.
- What if the dog walks right past an article without indicating it but you see it? Since I can only see my dog's tail and not his face, I always assume he gave the article a good hard look and I simply missed his indication. So I run right up to the article, pick it up, and wave it madly over my head for the judges to see. Unless you are extremely wealthy and don't care about your entry fee, I would advise you to do the same thing.
- What if there is no start article at the first flag? Simply turn around and tell the judges. They will have the track layer bring you a new start article.
- What if the glove is missing at the end of the track? Since you will not actually know the glove is missing, you may just see your dog fuss around at a particular spot for a while and then continue to track the track layer right out of the field. The judges may stop you and let you know they are looking for the glove. If they can't find it (perhaps a critter carried it away), the judges will pass your dog so don't fret if the glove is truly missing.
- What if your dog completely stops tracking due to some distraction and you cannot get him restarted? I once judged a basset hound at a test in the Cleveland area. He started well but stopped half way down the first leg where he had found a bunny nest a mere yard off the track. Baby bunnies look like little mice when they are newborns. There was nothing that handler could say to get that hound back on the track. He had found a nest of bunnies and had no intention of leaving such a prize. This is why they call it "the luck of the draw." That basset would probably have passed had he gotten any other track that day but the bunny track. Sadly, if you cannot get your dog to track after dealing with a distraction, you will fail.

No matter what sport we compete in with our dogs, we need to be prepared for the "what ifs" we will face at a test. The better prepared we are ahead of time for the unexpected, the more likely it is that we will deal with the situation in an appropriate and successful manner. I wish you the best of luck with all the "what ifs" in your life!