

THE MYSTERY OF NATURAL ABILITY TRACKING

By Bill Jensen

There is no question that the tracking phase of Natural Ability testing is the most “mishandled” of any testing event in NAVHDA. This is not a condemnation of the test, but rather a commentary on the human member of the team effort. I have studied it for many years and will attempt to clarify the problem and find a solution. Lack of experience for most handlers makes them apprehensive and nervous. This leads to confused thinking and transmits bad vibrations to the dog. This lack of experience can be partially overcome by education.

Tracking is principally a mental exercise. The dog must focus his attention on the task and not be distracted by other influences. It does not take a super nose to achieve success, and a fast pace will be harmful. How can we provide the proper handling?

The typical test is run with the tracking phase late in the day. This usually has the dog in the crate for a long period before his track. Be aware of the schedule and check with the Marshal to be certain of the timing. Take the dog for a run a half hour or so before the tracking test. This will reduce the pent up energy and clear the mind. Allow enough time for the dog to cool off and have some water before you are tested. Usually the handler is asked if you want the dog to see the bird before the track. My response is negative because the dog does not need this stimulation. We are trying to be calm. The only exception would be a dog that is so laid back or inexperienced that it may not leave the handlers side.

Be efficient without haste when you are on the line for the track. When the bird is released and leaves the scent trail the molecules begin dispersing. There are a lot of them so no need to panic, but time is of the essence. Do not run or rush because it gives your dog the wrong message. The dog must be calm to succeed. I like to have a little “ceremony” to start with. As I arrive at the site the judge will point out the feathers where the bird was released. I stop 2 or 3 yards away and lay the dog down then kneel down and quietly saying “easy – easy –easy” and gently stroke the dog. This does not take very long and it sets the stage for the work to follow.

I remove the lead and hold the collar. I choose the hand depending on the wind direction. The dog must be on the down wind side of the track to have scent. The track will be generally with the wind, but usually there will be a slight crosswind from the right or left. As you are approaching the test site make the observation so that if the wind is from the right you hold the collar with your left hand. I have tried using a slip lead to release the dog, but found that it was less effective and provided a chance for a tug on the collar or slap on the neck, which broke the dog’s concentration. This does not happen with the smooth release of your fingers.

Take the dog to the feathers and with your free hand point to them or ruffle the grass next to them. Do not push the dog’s head down to the feathers because the natural reaction will be resistance and conflict. This gives your dog something to worry about when he should

be focusing on the scent. Allow the dog to notice your hand movement and the feathers. Give the dog time to examine the scent and possibly move forward on the track. Many times they do not work forward because the feathers are so interesting. After a few seconds use your free hand to ruffle the grass down the track direction. When the dog moves down the track showing interest and concentration quietly release your hold on the collar. This is the moment of truth as the test has now begun. It is also a difficult decision to determine that your candidate is focused. Some evidence for you to use is that the head is low and the eyes are not averted.

If after some time, really only a few seconds, you have not succeeded in getting the dog to work down the track with concentration, stop what you are doing and return to step one. What will the judges think? They are in a hurry. Not so! They would much rather have you spend a few minutes getting a good start than watch your dog run aimlessly around the tracking field. You still have a firm grip on the collar so gently move back behind the starting point and proceed with the calming "ceremony", and the other steps described. The perceived pressure to release the dog is the undoing of many good performances. A third or even a fourth starting effort is not unthinkable.

I must point out that with my emphasis on this correct start you do not want to miss the point where the dog is engaged. Hauling him back through all those steps after he was ready to perform would not be positive. It is important to make the call on fairly brief evidence that the dog is focused. I usually release the dog by the time it has gone a yard down the track. After the release do not make any disruptive movement or give commands. If you are kneeling wait till the dog is down the line before standing. Then focus your gaze in the direction of the track as the judge described it. Ideally your dog will be busily working that track. How will you know? Some dogs give really good body language evidence, but others are much harder to read.

What if the dog is just running around seemingly without purpose? Continue to look down the track direction to give your dog the message. Do not watch the dog because if you are following him it implies acceptance of his efforts. Many times a dog with a good start will lose the track and make a cast, for reasons unknown, and soon return to pick up the track and work it diligently. This is not desirable but depending on the time away from the track could be of no consequence from a judging perspective.

Listen to the judge's advice or instructions. They are only trying to help your dog do its best work. If after some time the judges determine that the dog has not made progress, they may ask you to call and restart the dog. This is not a disaster and you should proceed as described above with perhaps less "ceremony". The penalty will be a maximum score of three with excellent performance after the restart. Occasionally if the dog did track some, but then lost it the judge will walk the handler a short distance down the track for the dog to see. This is often enough to get the dog back on the track. This is also scored as a restart. A prize I requires a minimum of three for track.

A modest training effort will definitely be helpful in assuring success. This cannot be done with drags. When you put people tracks in this mix it is completely different than the test,

and will be confusing to the dog. My favorite procedure is to start by using a duck for the tracking bird. They are durable, strong smelling and not too fleet of foot. We are intent on the dog finding this bird by using scent to track to the reward. If the bird is found by searching we did not achieve our goal. Try again at a later date because the success with the search method is not the message you want to emphasize.

Find a safe location with fairly short grass. You want to be able to visually follow the bird's travel, but ideally not stick out like on a mowed lawn. The dog should be close, but not watching the set-up. The duck must be flight disabled by pulling flight feathers from one wing. When the duck has walked a short distance, perhaps 20 to 30 yards cross wind or down wind, bring the dog to the start where your assistant has left a few soft feathers from the bird's underside. Proceed with the entire tracking start including the "ceremony" as previously described. The duck may still be visible to you, but from the dog's lower eye position probably not. We do not want the bird to go so far that the dog can't succeed.

When the dog tracks to the bird try and get to the dog promptly to salvage the duck, and congratulate the dog on the excellent job. Remember that a positive response to the dog's efforts is more important than saving the duck. Keep in mind that this training should be done after a nice energetic run to take the edge off. Repeat the exercise in a few days, but realize your dog may recognize the setup so the duck will have to be more invisible. This means taller cover and or greater distance. If your candidate has success with this effort move on to advanced work with a pheasant. All the same methods apply, but pheasants are far more capable of ground coverage, and much more likely to escape. Tying a 3 to 4 foot length of marking tape to the bird to assist in viewing the escape path may be helpful.

Choosing a good training site is helpful. Pheasants will move quickly to taller cover that they can see, and if there is fairly dense vegetation they will more likely hold while the dog works to that location. This ideal spot might be a slope in a pasture or hay field with a fence line, hedgerow or ditch bottom on the edge. Do not walk about or run the dog on this spot just before training, as it will leave confusing tracks. Don't forget the wind direction must not be in your face. Try to have about 100 yards smooth enough to see what the dog is doing for the tracking on the short cover. Go to the dog to assist and praise when bird contact is achieved. If after some time nothing is happening be prepared to move forward along the track route. Do this in small increments and stop to let the dog finish the job. It is most desirable for the dog to work independently, but you always want to have a successful conclusion.

This is really fairly simple work for dogs with good prey drive. I do not feel that a great amount of repetitious training is necessary or useful. By far the most important thing is to get the dog engaged in the work by a proper start.