

A Description Of The Perfect Handler Working Their Tracking Dog

By Terri Everwine © January 2011

You get to the start flag. Your dog pauses long enough to get scent from the article you show him. You are organized, the line laid out untangled. You give a quiet command to track, and the dog leaves the flag. You wait to see the dog's level of commitment before you move. You know your dog's typical start behavior and know when to follow. You play out line to the required distance and set off.

You study your dog as he moves along the track, and at the same time you're aware of your surroundings. You recognize your dog's tracking behavior and follow. You stop and wait for him to sort things out when his head comes up and he seems confused. You don't wander aimlessly behind him when his head is up in the air and he's obviously broken off from his typical tracking behavior.

You know when to give verbal cues to get his mind back to business, and you know when to be quiet and let him work. You notice the dog's head tip at one point, and remember it in case you find the dog has possibly overshot a turn. You recognize your dog's loss of scent cues, and are able to encourage the dog to search and work back to a turn. You've trained for this, you know your dog will search for and find the track again without any help from you other than a willingness to follow.

You also know how far beyond a turn your dog will usually give you that loss of scent indication, so you have a good idea of how far back the turn could be, and once you're beyond that distance you trust that the dog's continued forward motion is correct. You don't restrain or force him back to investigate just because you think there could be a turn.

When the dog does indicate a turn, you follow. You don't make the dog repeat the turn indication over and over before going with him. You know by his attitude when he's got the track, and that knowledge may be confirmed by your initial notice of something as subtle as that head tip. You also realize when the dog breaks off after making a turn that it's also possible that it wasn't a turn, after all. You let the dog decide and don't push or pull. You follow.

You look ahead, noticing things that might affect your dog's behavior on the track. A change of cover to the left, woods to the right. A fence up ahead that may draw your dog. You notice, but make no decisions, allowing the dog to make the choice.

You react to your dog's cues of potential articles nearby. You have taught an article indication so you know the articles belong to the track.

You keep a consistent tension on your line, and give and take with the dog's motion to maintain it.

Above all, you know your dog, are patient and willing to wait while your dog figures out the scent puzzles along the way. A good handler is almost like a dance partner.

You follow, the dog leads. You understand each other and know what to expect of each other.