

A GLIMPSE AT AKC TRACKING

By April Rifenburg

Tracking is scent work, a form of search and rescue. Tracking is a sport that is natural for dogs because they are using their canine instincts and abilities in the great outdoors, exercising mind and body. People like the teamwork involved, especially after witnessing their dog's enjoyment in using this uncanny ability. Tracking training eventually involves lots of walking and is a healthful activity for both ends of the leash. All dogs can track, and Bernese are especially good at it. Bernese love to have a job to do!

The dog is taught to follow a human scent to find a "lost article" of that person, generally a leather glove or billfold. An AKC Tracking Dog (TD) title is awarded to dogs that pass at an AKC regulation test. To earn a TD, the dog is required to be certified by passing a regulation track with an AKC tracking judge. The dog and handler can then enter and must pass at an AKC tracking test to earn a TD. The requirements for a TD are that the track be 440 to 500 yards in length, have three to five right angle turns, be aged from 30 minutes to 2 hours, and that the dog indicate the article. The handler may not guide the dog in any way.

There is also the more advanced Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX) title and the Variable Surface Tracking (VST) title. The tracks for these titles are 3-5 hours old, are twice as long as a TD track, have more changes of direction, have obstacles to negotiate, and have multiple articles for the dog to find. Earning all three tracking titles makes the dog a Champion Tracker (C.T.)

What does a spectator see at a tracking test?

*At an appointed time, the exhibitors draw for tracks in the presence of the tracking test secretary and one or both judges. The draw determines the running order of the tracks. Meanwhile, track layers are "laying" the test tracks, which have been plotted by the judges and track layers the previous day.

*On judge's order, the handler and dog approach the start flag. Most handlers put the tracking harness and line on the dog a short distance before this starting flag. There is an article at the start of a TD track as well as at the start of a TDX and VST track. The handler picks up the article, or has the dog retrieve it. This article must be presented to the judges at the end of the track. This article may be used to give scent to the dog either at the start or along the track if necessary. The handler then indicates the start to the dog, encouraging the dog to take in the track scent. When the team is ready, the handler commands the dog to begin tracking. Usually the command is "Find It" or "Go Find."

*For the TD track there is a second flag 30 yards past the start flag to indicate track direction. As the dog searches for the track direction, the handler remains behind the start flag so as not to foul the track at this point. As the dog begins to pick up the track scent, his head goes down and he pulls into the harness, heading out on the first leg. Off they go! When they pass the 30 yard stake, the two judges begin to follow the team a distance

behind. On a TD track, with the judge's permission, the dog may be restarted once between the start flag and the thirty yard flag.

*The dog must sort out a myriad of various scents and distractions to focus on the human scent trail he is to follow. When the dog reaches a change in track direction (turn), his head often comes up as he indicates loss and searches for the new direction. When he locates the new direction, his head will go down and he will pull strongly as he scents along the new leg. Wind and weather influence track conditions and may add difficulty for the dog.

*The handler follows about 20 feet behind his dog. The line is up to 40 feet in length to allow the dog to search for the track if necessary. The handler may give verbal encouragement.

*If the dog indicates loss of track, the handler stops and stands still especially if he knows he is on the track. This allows the dog to search in the correct area. It is important that the handler knows where the track leg is behind him for such situations. The handler can back up if necessary to help the dog find the track scent by using slack line as the dog searches. But he cannot turn around to walk back on the track, nor can he pull or guide the dog.

*It is a very happy and emotional moment when the dog finds the last article at the end of the track. The sport of tracking is a joy for dog, owner, judges, track layers, and all the people involved in putting on the test. Comradery and support are very apparent amongst trackers.