



## *A Note about STARTS*

Starts cause more problems for handlers than any other aspect of tracking (except, maybe, articles). It is a good idea to have a starting ritual that says to both dog and handler that a track is coming up.

A suggested routine: (For *his* read also *hers* !)

- 1) Fasten the dog into his tracking harness at the walk-in flag (or about 20 metres from the start flag if there is no walk-in flag). He is now wearing his “working clothes”.
- 2) Take your dog to the start on a fairly long lead (at least 3 metres) so that he is able to move about – tracklayers are not delivered to the start by helicopter so most dogs will pick up the tracklayer’s scent before they even get to the start article.
- 3) Allow your dog to decide how much scent he needs from the scent article. Some dogs will just give a cursory sniff, others will check it out thoroughly. Both are “correct”. If your dog gives you the article, take it, say “Thank you” and put it in your pocket.
- 4) Give an instruction – “let’s go “, “go find” or similar using your “happy voice” then let your dog find the track. Let the tracking lead run through your hands as your dog goes out. When he appears to settle on a direction, GENTLY increase the tension on the lead. One of two things will happen:
  - i) He will pull into the harness - “it goes this way” - so loosen the tension on the lead and follow. (Don’t forget to pick up the start article.) Be prepared for your dog to swing onto a slightly different line. This means that the scent has drifted a little bit away from the line of the track and the dog is simply correcting himself.
  - ii) He will leave that direction and come back. This is when you will need to cast your dog in a semi-circle so that he can cross the track and pick up the direction. Remember: the track will not be behind you. If he seems unsure, take a step or two in the direction he has most strongly indicated and gently increase the tension on the lead. If your dog is really having trouble, you may have to do this several times. It often helps to cast on a longer lead so that the dog can reach less contaminated ground.
- 5) Trust your dog – if he is wrong, the sky won’t fall and the sun will still rise tomorrow. Go back to the start and guide your dog to find the track. If your dog is right and you don’t follow, you are telling your dog that what he has done is wrong and he will quickly become frustrated.

The best case of canine frustration I have seen happened some years ago, on a corner. The dog was a German Shepherd, a lady of mature years and her handler was a man, also of mature years. On the corner in question, which turned onto a sand track, she gave a beautiful indication but her handler decided that that was too easy and wouldn’t follow. So she came back to him, cast around and indicated the same sand track. He wouldn’t follow. So she cast around again and again went down the sand track. He still wouldn’t follow. She had had enough. She came back, bit him gently on the hand and set off down the sand track. This time he followed!

It takes a very confident tracker to do that. That is what you are aiming for, at the start or along the track!



### Some causes of start problems:

- 1) ***Smothering your dog with the start article.*** He does not need you to pick it up and push it against his face. All that this does is fill the sinuses involved in scenting with so much scent that the dog finds it impossible to differentiate. **He should decide how much scent he needs!**
- 2) ***Sit or down your dog at the start.*** This is a guaranteed way to kill drive in a dog that really wants to track, especially since the dog doesn't want to (he wants to **get going**) and so usually is growled at by the handler!
- 3) ***Telling your dog where the track goes:*** In training, DO NOT TELL YOUR DOG WHERE THE TRACK GOES. Your dog MUST tell you! It is very, very easy to point in the direction of the first flag as you tell your dog to track. If you do this, your dog comes to believe that you know which way the track goes and will wait for you to tell him. With an unflagged track, you don't know where the track goes so your dog quickly becomes very confused because you haven't told him where to go. This is probably the commonest cause of problems with the start. Instead, hold your lead with both hands while allowing it to run out (i.e. hold it with "soft hands") until your dog commits to the track and you can follow.
- 4) **THE WALK-IN FLAG.** ***This flag does NOT line up with the Start Flag to indicate the direction of the track.*** It has one purpose only: ***To help the judge or steward to find the start flag.***
- 5) ***Be very careful that you do not encourage "appearance tracking".*** This happens when the dog is constantly shown the track (at the start or at corners, usually not intentionally), by the handler and he learns to set off along it with every appearance of tracking when, in fact, he has learnt that by putting his nose down etc he earns praise – he is not tracking, just going for a stroll in a certain body pose and may well be going in completely the wrong direction.