



FOLLOWING GHOSTS – THE ART OF TRACKING

Tracking is probably the most fascinating aspect of dog work because it is the only one in which we do not – cannot – tell the dog what to do. They have to tell us! To quote the preamble to the Tracking Rules, “The idea of Tracking (Trials) is to encourage dogs to make use of their strongest faculty by emulating as closely as possible the seeking and finding of a missing person”. That faculty is, of course, their ability to detect minute amounts of scent. The description of tracking as “following ghosts” comes from Suzanne Clothier’s book of that name and describes it very well.

Our dogs live in a world of ghosts that we cannot see. When we train a tracking dog we do three things

1. Teach our dog to follow the scent that we indicate – a particular human scent as opposed to kangaroo, rabbit, fox or even another human
2. Teach ourselves to “read” our dog so that we can know when our dog is on the scent, when he is unsure and when he is just going in that direction because he thinks we want him to.
3. Strengthen our relationship with our tracking dog because we, as handlers, must learn to rely on and trust our dog. This is usually the hardest part of tracking.

All dogs can track – not all dogs want to and this often reflects the relationship you have with your dog.

If you can answer ‘*Yes, most of the time*’ to the two questions:

- *Can you work your dog off lead for a short time?*
- *Does your dog come when called?*

your dog will track for you. If you can’t, then it is your relationship with your dog that you need to work on first. Some breeds do find nosework less natural – sighthounds (Salukis, Afghans, Whippets, Greyhounds) and some of the toy breeds can track but require a lot more patience than Working or Gundog breeds. That said, there are brilliant trackers and “slow learners” in all breeds.

Tracking training is about “enjoying the journey”. Who else works with your best friend in a beautiful pine forest with the scent of the pines, the songs of birds and the bright faces of wildflowers all around you? Or walks through the same forest, laying a track for someone else, or sits down with a congenial group of people having a well-



earned morning tea. Or has the benefits from increased fitness (some of us have been known to walk more than 10 km in a training session).

Who else knows the fantastic feeling of achievement when your dog finds the tracklayer at the end of a 1 km track and the Judge says “Congratulations, you passed “. Your dog knows they’ve done something pretty special too! There are no first places in Tracking, no trophies, just the graduated series of tests that have to be passed to earn Tracking Dog (TD), Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX) and Tracking Champion (T Ch) titles.

An excellent small book on tracking is “Following Ghosts” by John Rice and Suzanne Clothier. It is the best introduction. It is available direct from Flying Dog Press <http://www.flyingdogpress.com> or your Library might get it in for you.

To improve your dog’s scent work, whether it is Tracking or Obedience or just having fun, Scent Games are great. A really good resource is “Scent Games - Educating Your Dog’s Nose” by Suzanne Clothier and John Rice www.suzanneclothier.com/scent-games-educating-your-dogs-nose

The link also gives access to a number of other excellent articles on aspects of dog training, obedience and agility.

Above all, enjoy the journey – the good, the fantastic and the not so good. You have great company along the way – both canine and human!