



Lead Handling

Why do our tracking dogs work on a lead ? It isn't just so that they can't chase kangaroos ! In fact, some search dogs are trained to quarter and search off lead, but they must learn to work entirely independently of their handler and also have to be taught to return to the handler to take them to the find.

For our Tracking dogs,

The lead is probably the most important line of communication between the tracking dog and his handler.

Through the lead, the handler can tell whether the dog is drifting off line to trail the scent, when the dog is unsure or when they have lost the scent, as at a corner, well before it is visually obvious. If you are observant, a change in the “feel” of the lead can also give you advanced warning of your dog getting ready to chase kangaroos.

Unfortunately, the commonest method of holding the lead is to grab it with both hands, at waist height or higher, palms down and thumbs pointing away from you. The main problem with this method is that the handler usually holds the lead with a grip that is too tight so that he is unable to feel subtle changes in direction or tension. This grip makes it more difficult to breathe properly. It also gives a dog that pulls on the lead something to pull against and tends to make him worse.

Soft Hands: In many books on Tracking, handlers are told to hold the lead with “soft hands”.

How to do this ? Hold your hands at about navel height, one in front of the other, palms up and thumbs pointing down. Now place the lead on your palms, gently close your fingers over it and impart tension with your thumbs. It will feel a bit strange at first, but it is worth persevering with.

You can use your thumbs to increase the tension on the lead (“questioning” your dog) to just the right amount, to release the lead and allow it to flow out when your dog is searching for the track or to increase pressure enough to stop the dog. Many handlers say that they can't question their dog by increasing the pressure on the lead but very often the way they hold the lead means that they cannot make the subtle changes needed and exert too much pressure, so that the dog stops.

Feel the Difference:

To get used to handling and communicating via the lead, work with a human partner as your “dog”.

Let the lead flow through your hands as the “dog” searches for the track (also pulling it back with the hand nearest your body so that there is light tension on the lead at all times), then, as the “dog” finds the track and follows it, learn to feel the changes in tension as your “dog” drifts off the track or loses the scent (he slows down *before* stopping). Learn how the lead feels (tension) when the “dog” is on track – remember that any changes to the “feel” of the lead give information about how the “dog” is behaving.

Repeat with your eyes shut and learn just how subtle are the changes that can be picked up via the lead, well before they can be seen.

Now, go and practice with your real dog.



Good lead handling is like a dance. The lead can give you early warning of when to slow down, when to stop so that your dog can solve a problem on the track and when to follow because you are both on track. It can also tell you a tremendous amount about what your dog is experiencing because changes in tension tell you when your dog is unsure.

P.S.(1) If you have a small dog, you need a lead that is lighter than most tracking leads. It isn't possible to get the right tension (very light, but there) for a small dog with a normal tracking lead.

P.S.(2) Good communication between handler and dog, via the lead, doesn't happen overnight. It takes time and practice to build the magic relationship between dog and handler that is one of the joys of tracking.