

# Attaining a Champion Tracker Title - From TD to CT

By Tom Hacholski

“All you have to do is pass four tests to earn a coveted CT (Champion Tracker) title”, exclaimed the presenter at a tracking workshop I attended many years ago.

To some of those in attendance who had never tracked a dog, the statement was a sigh of relief. Four tests - big deal! These individuals had or were doing obedience with their dogs and knew that they had to qualify three times in each of the obedience levels of CD, CDX and UD to earn their respective titles. Then to earn a coveted OTCH (Obedience Trial Champion) title, they had to place in Open B and/or Utility B to earn points. The points are based on the number of entries in each class - more entries, more points. The magic number to be reached is 100 and additionally to place first in at least three combined Open B and Utility B classes. I always thought it was quite an accomplishment to earn the OTCH title in my part of the country in which the number two obedience dog and many other heavy hitters reside. The exhibitors who have great working dogs have to compete with the big boys, trial after trial, and trying to be able to place over them to earn points can be frustrating.

From those in attendance who had trained or were training a dog for tracking came a lot of smirky laughs. Four tests where all you have to do is pass! You and your dog with no other competitors to beat. However, in tracking, your competitors are all of the elements out in the field. The Terrain: Flat field grass fields at first, then in the next level of tracking the conditions of the terrain become more difficult. Higher grass to stalky fields, hills and valleys, ravines and small water crossings, woods that are relatively open to dense forest, fences, dirt, gravel and crossing asphalt or concrete roads. Then there's the Weather Conditions: Hot, cold, high humidity, dry or wet and wind from stagnant air to almost gale force. Other Distractions out in the field: The scent of other animals and humans, people either walking their dogs, hopefully on lead, to those hiking with their noisy kids and bike riders, loud sounds from autos and trucks mufflers driving by on adjacent roads with are but a few of the conditions with which a dog must deal while tracking, all of the

conditions a dog which has to deal with while tracking.

Much can be written about the individual elements and conditions a dog has to deal with and will be addressed in future articles on tracking. For now this article is putting the cart before the horse in that I'm addressing how one attains the top prize in tracking, becoming a Champion Tracker.

The first step is training to begin the road to obtain the first tracking title - TD - Tracking Dog. Tracking is a demonstration of the dog's ability to recognize and follow human scent and a service to mankind (1). While the dog's inherent sense of smell is phenomenal, the beginnings of training



*The final article - the glove*

for tracking involve getting the dog to focus on one particular scent - that of the tracklayer. Scent is yet another topic for future discussion. The dog is to follow the scent and “find” an article which personally belongs to the tracklayer, having his or her scent imbued in it, that has been left at the end of the track. There are different methods of introducing the dog to follow the scent trail left by one particular individual. My training begins slowly by introducing the dog to food as the motivation to recognize and follow the scent left behind by a person who has walked a previously mapped out path. This path is the “track” and at the end of the track the tracklayer places a personal item such as a glove. Food drops laid down

along the track and on or in the final article are problematic in Texas. We have fire ants that will glom on within seconds to any food stuffs that are dropped on the ground. Since I don't train in the excessive heat of summer and begin introducing a dog to tracking in the cooler fall months, the ants, though still somewhat present, aren't as bad.

My introduction method for the dog is somewhat involved but for the purpose of simplification we begin by having a partner, if possible, to act as tracklayer. The handler and dog, on a six foot lead, are stationed about five feet behind the tracklayer. The tracklayer steps off and places a flag to his or her left foot and puts a cloth or leather article, such as a sock, next to the flag. A food drop about “a quarter inch square of cheese, hot dog, chicken or whatever the dog really likes” is placed on or next to the article. The tracklayer steps off and places a food drop at every step, or every other step, until they go five yards. A cloth or leather glove is placed down and a drop or several food drops are placed on the glove. Then the tracklayer takes another step places a flag, food drop(s) and article - repeating the same process as placing the flag at the first start - going ten yards before placing a glove and putting down some of the food. The tracklayer then continues the same process, only this time walking twenty yards before putting down the final article with a jackpot amount of food. The tracklayer continues about ten yards in a straight line from the path, swings wide taking 10 to 20 steps doing a U-turn and walks back to and in line with the handler. Then the dog is encouraged by the handler to “find it” and with head down taking in the scent left by the tracklayer, the dog leads ahead of the handler and hopefully picks up and eats the food drops. When the glove with food drops is reached, heaps of praise is bestowed on the dog. Then stepping forward to the next start flag, the handler verbally urges the dog with the “find it” command and continues in the same manner. On to the final length and again the following the same process, only this time at the final article is the big Whoopee praise. We are done for the day. The next day the same straight line path is walked by the tracklayer, only the lengths



or every third step. The next day the lengths are increased to twenty, forty and eighty. With this doubling each day, by the sixth day the three lengths of tracks are quite long. These straight runs could be 160, 320, and 400 yards long. In today's urban world it's difficult to find a field with an area to accommodate such lengths. I find that doing 60 or 80, 120 and 200 to adequately get the distance in to reinforce the dog's tracking posture.

Around this time we introduce the dog to the non-restrictive harness and leash. The leash is between 20 and 40 feet in length and is attached to the harness. The dog must wear this harness while working at all levels of tracking. While testing for TD and TDX, the handler holding the leash must follow the dog at a distance no less than of 20 feet behind the dog. During testing for TDU and VST the handler may move up to a minimum of 10 feet behind the dog.

As the lengths increase, so does the separation of food drops, to the point that the drops are eventually totally removed. At this point the dog is not motivated by the individual food drops but the rewards at the final article of each length. The length of tracks increase as does the time that elapses from walking the track to returning even with the handler before the dog begins to run the track. This process "ages" the track and will come into play in the rules and regulations that govern each level of tracking title testing. These length of tracks are laid into the wind, with the wind and against crosswinds that can be non-existent to blustery, on mostly flat terrains, in lengths of grass from short to knee high.

From these straight line tracks, training proceeds on to working turns - first one turn alternating between right and left turns then on to two, three and four turns. This training method was created by Glenn Johnson in his book *Tracking Dog Theory & Methods*. It was the Bible for us old timers, but new training methods have emerged as the years have gone by. Many do not use food as a motivation but use the dog's favorite play toy or just tossing a ball at the end of the track. One technique is to form a complete bond between dog and handler (which seems to come naturally when training for tracking by any method) and using that bond for motivation to recognize scent to "search and rescue".

After a training period of as little as six weeks, which is exceptional, to generally eight weeks, an owner/handler may feel confident that their dog can enter and pass a Tracking Dog (TD) test. I myself have trained for months of repetitions to be sure that my dogs are ready. Again, because of the outside variables of nature, progress can be slowed and backing up to retrain a particular facet is required. Trouble working turns, distractions, stamina, age of the track, any which or more, may affect the focus on tracking. But if the dog is truly ready, on to the first test to pass - Certification.

**Certification.** In the eyes of the trainer, they may feel that their dog is ready to enter a Tracking Dog (TD) test. However, before they can enter, they must satisfactorily complete a certification test that is equivalent in complexity to that of a TD or TDU test. A particular track is laid at one time for one dog. This requires a large area that is suitable for the test. A site utilized for a test may only accommodate a limited number of tracks. Because of this and limitations imposed by AKC on the number of dogs that can be judged at a Tracking Test, entries are limited. A dog that is not truly ready to enter a TD test would take the spot of one that is ready. The trainer must contact a licensed or provisional AKC tracking judge to set a time and place for a certification test. If the dog satisfactorily completes the track in its entirety, a Certification form from the testing judge is given to the handler. This written statement must accompany each entry for a licensed or member tracking test for a dog that has not previously passed an AKC TD or TDU test.

So you've certified. You've passed your first test on the road to earning a CT title.

I am listing the basic requirements for the descriptions of the four tracking test levels that follow per those stated in the AKC Tracking Regulations. While the judges abide by these rules, there are also restrictions that they must follow while plotting the track. Some of these restrictions deal with the distance between each leg on a particular track and distance between adjacent tracks, minimum lengths of legs and directions to the tracklayers to name a few. While most of these restrictions are the same in all the different level tests of tracking, some are peculiar to that individual test. I am not listing all of these restrictions. One can find ALL of the rules and restrictions in the AKC Tracking Regulations.

**Tracking Dog Test.** You've trained the

basics for tracking and passed a certification test that was of the same complexity that you will face now in attempting to pass a TD test. The reasons for things we trained for now come into play. We practiced length of tracks which also added "age" to the tracks and worked turns that are substantial and abrupt changes in direction. While the judges have regulations and rules for plotting the track to use as guidelines, the TD test requires that the dog follow a track that is a minimum of 440 yards to a maximum of 500 yards with 3 to 5 turns. The track is "aged" between 30 minutes to 2 hours old before the dog can scent to follow the track to ultimately indicate the final article. There is a start flag and an additional flag at 30 yards down the track which indicates to the exhibitor the direction of the first leg. The dog and you have run the track, finding the final article. You have passed the second phase toward becoming a CT, becoming one of the dogs that have earned a TD title since the first tracking test that was held on October 7, 1947. Approximately 52% of the dogs that enter a TD test pass.

I will briefly discuss the Tracking Dog Urban (TDU) Test that was instituted in 2014 as an optional titling tracking test that is an intermediate step between TD and the Variable Surface Test (VST). While the TD test is held in relatively open fields, the TDU may be laid in the vicinity of buildings or other structures such as fences, breezeways, ramps, stairs, courtyards, bridges and buildings with two openings. These tests are generally held on school grounds and office complexes. The TDU test is similar to the TD test in that the track is a minimum of 400 yards to maximum of 500, still with 3 to 5 turns and aged between 30 minutes and 2 hours. The differences are placement of an intermediate article approximately midway of the total length of the track and that it will have a minimum of two different surfaces. At least 10% but no more than 30% of the track will be plotted on non-vegetated surfaces. Approximately 27% of the dogs that enter a TDU test pass.

**Tracking Dog Excellent Test.** In my opinion, this level of tracking is similar to the jump in difficulty between Novice and Open in obedience - maybe more so in tracking. So you've been training up to and maybe over the maximum two hour age limit for a TD or TDU test and have run tracks that are 500 yards long with 5 turns.

*Continued next page...*



your game. In order to pass this test, you'll have to work your way up to aging the tracks a minimum of 3 hours to a maximum of 5 hours, all the while the elements are dissipating the scent. A little moisture and cooler air are good things - heat, wind and dry ground conditions are not. Then you have to train for the dog to work 5 to 7 turns while running an 800 to 1000 yard track. Now there are new challenges that will be introduced to the dog. You have to train for varying changes in vegetation, a single flag start, multiple articles, cross-tracks and obstacles.

**Starts.** Unlike TD and TDU where there is a start flag and 30 yards down the leg an additional flag to indicate direction of the first leg, there is only one flag on the entire track which has been placed at the start. This is also the case for VST test starts. With only a start flag the dog has to work to identify the direction of the first leg. This is called a "blind start". The handler has to have the patience to wait for the dog to commit to the direction before leaving the start flag. Most failures in this test occur because the dog goes substantially in a different direction from the start than was laid and cannot recover to pick up the tracklayer's scent.

**Articles.** Unlike TD and TDU where there is an article placed at the start and end, there are two additional dissimilar intermediate articles. When plotting a TDX track, the judges direct the tracklayer to place one article at the start flag and the next two each at wide intervals on the track and the fourth one at the end of the track. The exhibitors can leave the first article at the start flag but must present the other three articles to the judges at the completion of the track. If any of the two intermediate or end articles are not found, the dog fails the test.

**Cross-tracks.** Upon instructions from the judges, two cross-tracklayers lay plotted cross-tracks at least 1 hour and 15 minutes and not more than 1 hour 45 minutes after the tracklayer started laying the actual track. The track is crossed at two widely different separated places. The purpose of the cross-tracks is to see if the dog will recognize and distinguish the different scent from that of the original tracklayer. If the dog takes the cross-tracks for more than 50 yards off the original track, he or she fails the test. Training for this requires a person other than the tracklayer to walk across his or her original path at various lengths along the way.

**Obstacles.** Various scent obstacles can come into play while running a TDX track. These include some changes in terrain and vegetation cover including gullies and woods. There are natural obstacles such as streams and man-made obstacles such as fences, bridges and lightly traveled roads. A requirement of plotting a TDX track is that there must be at least two obstacles that the dog must encounter.

The purpose of an obstacle is to test one or more of the following:

1. The dog's ability to adapt to changing scent conditions;
2. The dog's ability to continue scenting while overcoming physical obstacles; and
3. The dog's ability to continue scenting under difficult and varied handling conditions (2)

I can over simplify training for these conditions – the additional articles, cross-tracks and obstacles – by just by saying that working repetitions of each of the specific drills, focus and stamina from the dog and patience on the handler's part go a long way toward successfully running the track.

OK, you've worked your butt off and passed test number three. The first TDX test was held in 1980. Presently the pass rate for the TDX test is approximately 22%. Now on to VST, the last test.

**Variable Surface Tracking Test.** The first VST test was held in 1995 and for the first 10 or 11 years the pass rate was around 2% of all of the dogs that had entered. Now with better training methods, the pass rate has increased to approximately 12%, still a difficult test to pass. As suitable fields for tracking were eliminated due to population growth and new construction, the need for a new level of tracking in an urban setting was developed. This test requires that the dog recognize human scent, adapting to changing scenting conditions, while working on non-vegetated surfaces. These tests are held where there is a fair amount of grass, more of a manicured lawn rather than field grass, and wide expanses of non-vegetated surfaces. Most college campuses and office complexes with the required amount of land and buildings offer diverse scenting conditions. This test requires the dog to problem solve.

The judges have certain restrictions when plotting a VST test but the minimum requirements that the dog must meet are to follow a track that is a minimum of 600 yards but no more than 800 yards. The age of scent on the track is not less than 3 hours or more than 5 hours old. The track

will have a minimum of three different surfaces, which include vegetation and two areas devoid of vegetation – concrete, asphalt, gravel, dirt, sand or mulch. The areas devoid of vegetation will comprise of at least one-third (1/3) but not more than two-thirds (2/3) of the total length of the track (3). The track will be plotted with at least 4 turns but no more than 8 turns. At least one of the turns is to be designated as the "moment of truth" turn. This 90 degree turn is in an area devoid of vegetation and is plotted to allow at least 30 yards before crossing or returning to vegetation. This MOT turn is one of the defining tasks that the dog has to work out while on a VST track and generally, but not always, occur in the wide expanse of parking lots. Articles are not to be placed either 30 yards before or after the MOT turn. The articles are four dissimilar, common, everyday items made of fabric, leather, metal and plastic that are not smaller than 2" X 4" or larger than 5" X 5" and weigh no more than 8 ounces that can be safely picked up by the dog. The start article only may be one made of cloth or leather.

While a dog and handler do not encounter obstacles during a VST, all tracks are to be laid utilizing buildings that create the movement of the scent which is affected by the proximity of the buildings. The tracks also utilize any other structures such as breezeways, fences, bridges, ramps, stairs, roofed parking garages, courtyards and buildings with one or more openings and any other major structures. The intent is for the dog to handle the changes in scent dispersion created by the structures.

Your dog has come and sat, stood over, nosed or picked up to an article marked with a number "4" indicating the final article. You go to your dog, hold up this article for the judges to see. The gallery that followed along to watch the dog's progress cheers and whoops it up while you hug your dog and cry tears of joy. You did it! You and your dog (you're a team after all) passed the four tests – Certification, TD or TDU, TDX and VST.

Now the AKC will issue a certificate that permits the use of the letters CT before the dog's name. Congratulations !!

Continued on page 25





*Tana Rugg working with the puppy*

The following Dalmatians are Champion Tracker title holders. Listed along with their owners are the dates and test that they were entered in to earn the CT title:

**1. CT CAN/INTL/UKC CH Monumental Moment at Ravenwd, RE, TT, CGC "Mackie".** 5/22/2005 - Tana Rugg - Denver Foothills Tracking Club, Littleton, CO

**2. CH CT Tilbury's Dream Quest of Pal "Seeker"** 5/20/2007 - Thomas Hacholski - Denver Foothills Tracking Club, Denver West Office, Park, Golden, CO

**3. CT Tilbury's Cinnamon Splash of Pal "Sydney"** 9/14/2008 - Thomas Hacholski - Columbine State Poodle Club, Mental Health Institute of Ft. Logan, Littleton, CO

**4. CT CH Patch Mtn C Pepper N Paisley RA, OA, OAJ, NF, NAP, NJP "Carina"**  
8/02/2009 - Sara Pruyne - Dog Tracking Club of Maine, Colby College, Waterville, ME



*Tom and Sydney working a gully and a transition from grass to gravel to high grasses to concrete*

**5. CT INTL CH Monumental Foreign Power AM/CAN CD, RE, THDX, TT (2nd Generation) "Jordi"** 11/01/09 - Tana Rugg - Denver Foothills Tracking Club, Denver West Office Park, Golden, CO

**6. GCHB. CT RDCH Blackthorn Coreopsis Of Patchmt, VCD1, CDX, RE, OA, OAJ, NF, OAP, OJP, ROM, CAN CH "Cory"** (2nd Generation) 8/01/2010 - Sara Pruyne - Dog Tracking Club of Maine, Colby College, Waterville, ME

**7. CT CH Patch Mt's About Time, RE, VCD1 RE, AX, OAP, OJP, NFP "Maevé"**  
7/31/2011 - Linda McSherry - Dog Tracking Club of Maine, Colby College, Waterville, ME

**8. GCH CH CT UR02 UKC CH Monumental Ravenwd Smart Choice CD, RE(3rd Generation) "Sadie"**  
3/10/2013 - Tana Rugg - Pembroke Welsh Corgi Club of the Rockies, Denver West Office Park, Golden, CO



*Jody Fraser's Nicky working out a MOT turn..*



*Tom and Seeker working the asphalt surface in a parking lot*

**9. CT Dakota Fyreagele Cosmopolitan VCD4 (UDX, MX, MXJ, VST), TDX2, VER, RE, MXP2, MJP2, MJPB, NF, OFP "Nicky"** 7/27/2014 - Jody Fraser - Dog Tracking Club of Maine, Colby College, Waterville, ME

**10. CH CT Tilbury's Tomorrow's Another Day of Pal "Scarlett"** 6/10/2017 - Thomas Hacholski - Glenbard All Breed Obedience Club, Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL

**11. GCH CH CT UKC CH Monumental Taking the High Road, BN, RA, CAX, BCAT (4th generation) "Brady"** 5/06/2018 - Tana Rugg - Dalmatian Club of America National Specialty, Denver West Office Park, Golden, CO

*Footnotes (1), (2), (3) AKC Tracking Regulations*

