

The Real Deal- A Tracking Test

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Obedience, Rally, and Agility have Trials. Tracking and Hunting have Tests. Obedience, Rally, and Agility receive scores, starting with a perfect score and deducting points. Tracking tests are pass or fail, with no time limit as long as the dog is actively working the track. Because every track will be different, with various challenges, and all dogs track differently, there is no fair way to compare and score one performance against another. Some dogs will run a Tracking Dog test in 4 minutes, while another equally honest tracking dog will scent every step and take 30 minutes to finish. Both are wonderful passing tracks and should not be scored against each other.

In Obedience, Rally and Agility, a dog must earn 3 'legs', under 2 or 3 different judges to obtain a new title. In tracking, you must first pass a "Certification Track" and then pass a test with 2 judges. Your certification judge can also be a testing judge, however, you must be aware of minor rules about training with that judge.

Tracking tests require a large amount of field space. Approximately 5-7 acres of field for each Tracking Dog track, and approximately 10-15 acres for each Tracking Dog Excellent track are needed. Most tests take place on private property offered by generous landowners. Some State and local parks are available in certain areas of the country. Getting access to and maintaining working relationships with local landowners requires good public relations work by local club members, and all tracking participants must be on their best behavior to maintain that relationship.

Now, you have trained hard, passed your certification, and have entered a test. Here are a few more hidden bits of information.

Tracking tests tend to be held in very rural locations. The premium list will indicate where the test headquarters is located. Trust the actual written directions over your GPS. Once, when using my GPS, my traveling companion and I did arrive at HQs, but it was on dirt tracks and through

peoples' barnyards! Fellow exhibitors had a good chuckle talking about our very roundabout route. Facilities may well be limited to almost nonexistent: Portapotties, a cardboard table and a couple of chairs may be the only indication that you are at the right spot.

Tracking tests are a labor intensive endeavor for test giving clubs. The day before a test, the two judges, the test secretary, the chief tracklayer, tracklayers, and any apprentice judges arrive at the test fields. The judges may well have used Google Earth to have a general idea of field use, but until they start walking on the fields, ditches and fences can't be figured into how those tracks will actually be planned. Both judges and the tracklayer will make maps and extensively discuss how to plot the track. Flags - think surveyor flags - are used to mark the start, turns, glove placement, and to help the tracklayer walk the exact track the following morning.

Because tracking tests are an outdoor, all-weather activity, don't expect formal attire from the judges. Sunscreen, rain gear, and bug repellents are to be expected. Hats, tall boots, and clipboards may be your only indication of who is judging the test. I was told if the judges are wearing tall boots and water repellent pants, the exhibitors would be well advised to wear similar attire.

On test day, the same group will assemble at least an hour before the start of the test. This time, the tracklayer will walk the track by themselves, supervised from a distance by either the judges or the Chief Tracklayer. Back at the test HQs, the "track draw" will

occur. Entries are in the catalog in the order they were received, or initially drawn from the entry lottery. At the actual test, numbers are drawn for the track-running order. The first dog in the catalog may actually draw and run the last track. It comes down to "The Luck of The Draw". The judges make every effort to make all the tracks similar and of equal complexity, but in actuality, some tracks can be more challenging than others. What might not be any challenge to one breed can be difficult for another. Picture standing puddles for a hunting dog or a shallow ditch for a Chihuahua. Excitement is in the air for the drawing of the tracks - some people want first, others want later tracks. Many clubs add a local twist to the items used in the draw. DCA in Ohio used a numbered Buckeye candy - I kept mine until it rotted. Our club in Maine uses lobster-shaped soap!

Tracking clubs are usually very social clubs. Most members show up for the test to encourage all participants. Tracking tests are an event where it is hoped that everyone passes!

At an ideal test site, all tracks will be within walking distance of the test HQs. Reality is, the fields can be spread over several miles. Exhibitors will follow the judges' vehicle, and spectators are encouraged to carpool when necessary. Riding along with the judges can be a huge learning experience for newcomers.

Please join us at the DCA National Tracking Tests in Ashville, NC on Sunday, May 3, 2020! We are offering Tracking Dog Urban and Variable Surface Tracks

