

What Age Can A Dog Begin To Track?

By Sara Pruyne

People often ask me: "What age do I start training my dog to track?" or "Is my dog too old to track?"

When do puppies start using their noses? - at about one minute old! Next time you are sitting in the whelping box, listen carefully and you will hear the puppies sniff their way to their mother. Want to know what nipple has the most milk? That nipple must smell the best, too. Take a couple of puppies, move them a foot from Mom, and see who is the first to find their way back. Tracking dogs in the making. When the puppies are playing, try hiding treats and bones. Puppies who know how to use their noses will quickly find all the hidden treats.

Dogs must be six months old to enter an AKC tracking test, and all dogs must be certified before you can submit an entry for a tracking test. There is no minimum age for certification. I have heard of puppies certifying as young as ten weeks old. A local breeder of German Shepherd Dogs has her pups certified before they go to their performance homes.

There are many books dedicated to tracking. My favorite books for starting dogs are: "Try Tracking" by DCA member Carolyn Krause, and "Enthusiastic Tracking" by Sil Sanders. Both books provide instruction plans and are fun and easy to read and follow. Read everything you can about tracking.

Tracking is a sport that dogs of any age can do without stress on young or old dog joints. Dogs need to mature mentally to compete in obedience, and physically before starting agility training. Most experts recommend that owners do not overly exercise puppies and young dogs, but to wait until they are physically mature - usually at least 18 months for most Dalmatians. Training for the show ring doesn't usually mentally challenge a pup. Tracking fills a wonderful void of what to do while my pup grows up!

There are as many ways to train a dog to track as there are trainers. Actual tracking training can start at 6 to 7 weeks. Dalmatians

of any age can be food motivated, and I start my baby tracks with lots of food.

How old is too old? If your Dalmatian can still smell, it can learn to track.

The biggest obstacle for tracking the older dog is the owner. Owners who have trained their dogs in obedience or agility may need some "retraining".



Kris Carlsson & Bobby putting on the harness at the start.

Tracking is one sport where true teamwork comes into play, and the dog is the team leader. The owner is there for support, but

*"How old is too old?
If your Dalmatian
can still smell,
it can learn to track."*

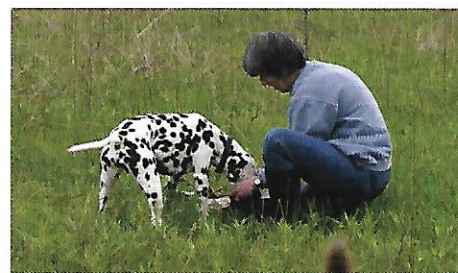
cannot tell the dog where the track goes; that is the dog's responsibility. Dogs trained for other events are very aware of the handler's body language, and the owner must consciously work at not sending any signals to the dog, or they run the risk of sending the dog off the track and in the wrong direction. The dogs have to learn to trust themselves. It is not unusual to see older dogs stop and stand on the track, and wait for the handler to help them out. The handler will learn a whole new understanding of patience and letting the dog do all the problem solving. Then there is the thrill when the dog understands that they are the team leader and where they lead, the handler will follow.

Many years ago at the National Specialty in Colorado, there was a brief "Introduction to Tracking" seminar held in an adjacent lot to the host hotel. The local training club was very against the use of food in tracking training. Of course they also had mainly Golden Retrievers, and trained for obedience with the 'old fashioned' way - without using food. We heard from participants: "My dals just didn't seem to learn." Enter the seminar and the instructor said: "They are Dalmatians. They work for food." Bingo - sudden tracking dogs!

I start young puppies at 8 weeks on a baby size harness, 8 foot leash, and lots of food and articles. What are articles? Socks, scarves, bandanas, work gloves, any small

piece of clothing that smells like you. Do not wash them ahead of time; the more they stink, the better. Use food and praise to encourage that youngster to follow his nose and find things. Every effort is rewarded with praise. Tracking is hard mental work, so keep the lessons short and positive. Slowly add distance and age to the track.

During the cold Winter months, or the blazing hot Summer months, when you are confined indoors, it's a great time to challenge your puppies to use their noses. There are lots of ideas for "nose games", and they all involve helping your puppy strengthen their scenting and discrimination skills. Hide their favorite toy and have them search for it. Have a child hide and play "Hide and Seek".



Sara Pruyne and Carina

I would love to hear your stories about old and young tracking dogs. I know of one successful tracking dog that was started young, then tracking was put aside and she went onto other things. Many years later she still remembered the game and succeeded in passing a test in horrible weather conditions; showing that while their bodies might start to let them down, the nose keeps working just fine!

Please feel free to drop me an email. I love to talk about tracking. My email is spotme@megalink.net

Until the next time...Happy Tracking!



Scarlett (CH CT Tilbury's Tomorrows Another Day of Pal) playing "the glove game"