
A New Class for DCA National Specialty - TRACKING

by Michael P. Pumilia

In August 1987, the Dalmatian Club of America will host its first-ever Tracking Test during the DCA Specialty week in Colorado. The event is open to titled and certified tracking Dals. For you see, in order to even show, a non-titled dog must be certified by a tracking judge before even being allowed to enter. Come to the Rockies and see the thrills - Tracking!!

Tracking is the most unique event amongst the classes for breed and obedience. In a single day, the handler and dog can show, pass, and earn an AKC title. In one day! Plus tracking is presided over by not one, but two judges, who must mutually decide which teams will pass and which must fail. On the down side, defeat is instantaneous and signified by a loud whistle, which means "stop everything." Perhaps it is the quick success or failure, or the fact that the dog, and only the dog, can effect the outcome, that makes Tracking so fascinating. But tracking handlers do handle and they can mean the difference between success and failure. It is both a very simple class and a most complex study of dog and mankind - a most unique event.

Tracking is a pure sport. The handler and dog have clearly defined roles. The AKC Rules are few and two judges watch over the scene. The tracks themselves are plotted on paper the day before the Test by both the judges. On the day of the test, a third person, the tracklayer, will take the chosen object, such as a dark-colored glove, and walk the plotted course. Guiding him is a plot of the track and track-marking stakes set the day before by the judges. At the designated spot at the end of the track, the object is dropped. This is what the dog must find. When this is done, only two starting flags will remain with all the other stakes being removed by the tracklayer. A half hour later, as a minimum, the dog and handler can proceed to the start to sniff out the course and find the article.

Only two starting flags will guide the team to the first leg of the track. Once past the second flag, there is no turning back. What is ahead is the glove or the whistle, and there is no visible indication where the track goes. All is up to the dog's nose to ferret out the tracklayer's scent among the grass, field mice, rabbits, etc. The handler must learn "to read" the dog to understand what the dog's nose is smelling. The Read must recognize turns in the track, distractions, fatigue, laziness, and other scents. The AKC track must be 440 to 500 yards long; that is approximately $\frac{1}{4}$ mile. There is no time limit, as long as the dog is actively working. I have been there when two Dalmatians covered the required distance in just four minutes, once as handler and the other as judge. Both times it was a sparkling thrill. That is Tracking!

A dog's nose is thought to be at least 300 times more acute than a human's. As a handler, the person must rely on the dog and not out-think the dog by thinking they know where the track is. It is fascinating to see the dog work out difficult scent paths such as swirls around trees, or bubbles near gulleys. One can almost see the physical whirring of the gears in the dog's mind as the dog backtracks, checks the disturbance, and then decides the proper course. For the handler, there are the attributes of patience, perseverance, and tactical planning. Reading the dog provides the clues to the human whether praise, concern or comment is needed. But the handler is not allowed to guide the dog; that will bring the whistle. Thus Tracking really is the purest form of Man and Dog working together. Each must rely on the other but cannot interfere.

For the spectator, Tracking is ideal. The atmosphere is relaxed, the exercise is easy, and the chance to see the handler/dog relationship at close hand is marvelous. As the team approaches the first flag, a copy of the track can be passed among the gallery. Often, another tracklayer will provide commentary for the spectators, so that it is possible to view the track on paper and watch the dog work the same corners and gulleys as it has been drawn. When trouble arises, from a tricky wind or a tough terrain, the gallery can feel what the handler and dog are experiencing and watch them work their way out of the pitfall. As the dog makes the

final turn on the last leg toward the coveted glove, tension rises for handler, judge, and spectator alike. As a spectator and also as judge, I've wanted to shout that the glove is only 20 feet more! The final surge and pounce to the glove would make anyone cheer. Tracking is that single moment that the dog comes up with the glove. The thrill is always special, for everyone attending.
