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# KASHKA AND THE VST

by Cathy Murphy and Dawn Antoniak-Mitchell

AKC has a new Tracking Title, the VST (Variable Surface Tracking) which clubs can begin offering in September of 1995. Dawn Antoniak Mitchell sent us the following information on her Dals in Tracking, plus her first experiences with the VST. Kashka's impressive work on her first VST track as a demonstration of a dog's ability to do this type of tracking is another confirmation of the outstanding tracking ability and love for the work inherent in most Dalmatians.

Dawn writes: "Paisley's Phantasy Phlite CDX TDX finished her UD June 3, 1995, at the Platte Valley Kennel Club show in Fremont, NE. Kashka earned her CD in three shows in 1989 and finished her CDX in four tries in 1990. Because of health problems Kashka had, we thought she would never finish a UD so we decided to try her in tracking while continuing to show her in Open. Unfortunately there weren't many trackers around Lincoln, at the time so we were on our own to muddle through Glenn Johnson [Glenn Johnson has an excellent book on training your dog to track] and teach Kashka to track. Luckily, Kashka has a natural drive to track; she caught on very quickly and required no more motivation than "killing" the article at the end. She earned her TD in 1992 and by that time Jeff and I were hooked on tracking. We made the draw for the first TDX trial we entered, drew the first track of the day and passed the 900 yard long track in nine minutes, earning Kashka's TDX one year after her TD.

"By this time Kashka's health problems were resolved and we began UD training in earnest. It took ten tries, but she earned her legs with two all-breed first places, one all-breed second place, and a Highest Scoring Dal prize. We're now concentrating solely on training for the Variable Surface Tracker title approved by the AKC this past March. This new tracking title requires the dog/handler team to follow a stranger's track which is 3-5 hours old, 600-800 yards long over various vegetated and non-vegetated surfaces (concrete, gravel, etc), and identify three articles dropped along the track by the tracklayer. While tracking on non-vegetated surfaces is not impossible for dogs it seems to be more challenging for them.

"Last spring I took Kashka to a VST seminar presented by AKC representative John Bernard and we were selected to run a building track. I had just begun working Kashka on non-vegetated surfaces so I was unsure how she would handle a track that started in grass, turned down the middle of a sidewalk, PASSED UP SOME STAIRS AND THROUGH AN ABANDONED ARMY BUILDING, CAME OUT ON A SIDEWALK, turned onto grass and ended in the middle of a parking lot. The building was literally falling down - we had to pick our way through fallen ceiling tiles, holes in the floor and years worth of trash. To complicate things even further a metal article was dropped in the middle of the building in a pile of trash. Kashka took a good sniff at the start flag and took off at a run in the grass. She worked the first corner for a while before step-tracking down the middle of the sidewalk, up the stairs and into the building. At this point I had to worry not only about keeping the lead from getting tangled but also about tripping over my jaw which was dragging on the ground! She found the metal article immediately and retrieved it back to me. Before I could put the article in my pocket she was tracking out of the building, finishing the rest of the track easily. I was amazed at Kashka's determination and became 100 percent committed to training her for her Champion Tracker title at that point. Any dog earning all three tracking titles will earn the C.T. prefix title, signifying Champion Tracker. Clubs may begin offer-

ing VST Trials in September. Although Law school will limit my ability to travel to trials I still hope to get her VST title this fall and so complete her requirements for the C.T. Meeting people from around the country who track and train for the VST tracking title has caused us to change our training methods to facilitate the transitions between tracking titles. Both Kashka and Strider (Melody Lord Of The Rings CD TD) were taught serially, first for the TD, then the TDX, and now the VST. Using a road as an example, they were taught to stop at the road for the TD (TD tracks would not cross a road), then they were taught to pass in a straight line and start tracking again on the other side of the road for the TDX, as TDX tracks would not turn in the middle of a road. Now, since VST tracks may turn and go down the road they are taught to step-track across the road. It wasn't easy breaking the old patterns we had taught during TD and TDX training. We had to back the track age down to thirty minutes and smear food across the road to teach them to put their noses down on pavement. Now they understand the track may go anywhere.

"We began training Stormee (Sailor Red Sky At Morning) at twelve weeks old with a different approach. We introduced her to tracking in short grass but after about a week we began introducing anything that she could physically manage such as roads, parking lots, dirt, gravel, ditches, tree lines and crosstracks. Since she didn't understand fully what she COULD do, she also didn't understand what she COULDN'T do so she tackled every cover change, surface and obstacle with enthusiasm and a surprising amount of accuracy. We used lots of food and praise on the relatively short (50-100 yard) straight-line tracks and always set the training situation up so that she had a positive training experience.

"When she began skipping food drops on the straight tracks we introduced corners and began fading the food drops down to "trouble spots".

"In one month she has progressed to a full length TD track at twenty minutes with her only food reward coming at the end. Just like Kashka and Strider, Stormee works at a fast trot and relishes the games of tug-of-war we play with the article at the end. She now has the basics for all three tracking titles. We only need to work on increasing the age and distance [of the track] for the advanced ones. She handles puppy-sized TDX obstacles and VST surfaces with the same intensity as TD cover.

"We have introduced this "combined" approach to training to the tracking class we're conducting for our local obedience club and so far we've seen excellent progress with breeds as diverse as Boxers, Pulik, and Goldens.

"We hope Dalmatians will be well represented at VST trials in the future. They certainly have the ability and the HEART to track well!"

Thank you, Dawn, for the excellent information on the VST plus the training tips. Good tracking instructors are not available everywhere; a number of Dalmatians have been taught tracking by their owners with the help of a good book. Dawn's training methods should be of assistance to any number of Dalmatian owners training their Dals for tracking, especially those with TDX and VST in mind. Every Dal does not learn the same way; since variations on the training theme may be needed for the individual, Dawn's information is extremely helpful.