

Tracking Dog Excellent - The Journey

by Gayle J. Geiger

I began in the sport of tracking in 1990 with my first Dalmatian, Snoopy. Our training with a local obedience club was rather unstructured. There were various tracking handlers that offered small bits of advice, but no one really offered much in the way of theory. The result of that type of training was that small problems were often overlooked.

One of the tracking trainers told me that your dog should pull you all along the track. When the dog reached a turn, he was to indicate strongly (pull you off your feet were the actual words) before you followed. I stood at more turns waiting for my dog to pull me through the turn, until he finally gave up. No one noticed what was going on and I thought my dog was a poor tracking dog.

At my first certification, Snoopy came to the first turn, indicating a right turn. I stood my ground, hearing the trainers' voice in my head telling me to wait until he pulls me off my feet. The dog never pulled me off my feet, but indicated the track went right a number of times. Then he finally gave up and quit tracking. The judge came up to me and asked why didn't I follow my dog when he turned right. I said he didn't strongly indicate the turn. That judge taught me one of the most important lessons right there - the dog doesn't have to pull you off your feet.

Yes, it sounds so apparent now, but I was quite a beginner at the time. I never again asked Snoopy to pull me off my feet at turns and he became a far more confident tracker when I didn't question him and I learned to read his indications. When you are around tracking people, you will often hear the phrase "read your dog." It is a difficult concept to explain in words, but is one of the most important aspects of tracking to understand.

In 1992, Snoopy, at age six, passed his Tracking Dog (TD) title running the track in just four minutes. We continued training

for the Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX) title, but were never able to pass this test. Snoopy was retired from TDX training when he developed some health problems. All too often our first dog becomes our best teacher and Snoopy was no exception.

In the interim, I acquired Danny, a one-year old Dalmatian. Danny was frightened of the world around him and I thought tracking would be a wonderful way to develop his self-assurance. I was able to read and understand tracking much more with Danny who became a very confident tracking dog. Danny earned his TD at age four.

We entered a number of TDX tests, but Danny often made that one mistake that cost us the title. I just knew that he could do it and on a very cold October day in 1999, Danny passed the TDX test. He tracked confidently the entire way, worked through some tough spots and stopped at the final article and looked back at me with a smile on his face!

A few pieces of advice:

- Make every training day a positive experience.
- Invest in good hiking boots and warm socks.
- Invest in good waterproof pants and jacket – being soaked to the skin is a miserable way to spend the day.
- Just smile when on the day of your first TDX test, someone asks you if Dalmatians can track.
- Save all old socks, gloves, wallets, shoes, etc. for future TDX articles.
- Wear gloves, even when it is hot – most Dals love to track fast and pull hard!
- Enjoy the journey.
- Trust your dog.



"Danny" (on the left) and "Snoopy" (on the right), take a break from tracking training. Photo courtesy Gayle Geiger.