

Four Essential Skills and Common Problems with Beginning Trackers

Copyright 1999 by Allison Platt

After evaluating several beginning tracking classes, it is clear that there are a common set of problems tht most beginners have to deal with. Most of these problems (not surprisingly) are caused by the lack of experience of the handlers. The beginning stages of tracking are meant to teach the dog what you want him or her to do, and to teach you the skills you need as a handler to allow you to begin running blind tracks. The four basic skills that are essential to success as a handler are: learning to lay tracks, shaping tracking behavior; learning to line handle, and learning to read your dog.

Tracklaying. Serpentine tracks are not the easiest tracks for the beginning tracker to plot. When the look at the tracking journals of my beginning tracking students, I see that many handlers make the curves too sharp. To help understand this problem and help solve it, read the track requirements in the AKC tracking regulations. One of the requirements is that each leg of a track must be a minimum of 50 yards from any other leg. For example, if you start out going north, walk 50 yards and make a 90-degree turn to the right, walk another 50 yards and make another right-angle turn, then walk a final 50 yards and drop a glove, you will end up facing in the opposite direction from the direction you were facing at the start. Very few people would suggest you should start a dog in tracking by laying right angle turns like these. See Figure 1.

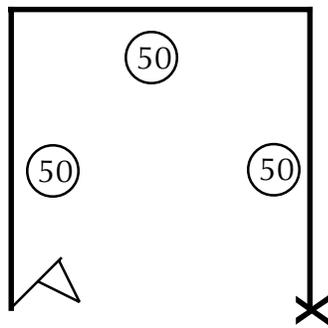


Figure 1: Conventional track with two right-angle turns

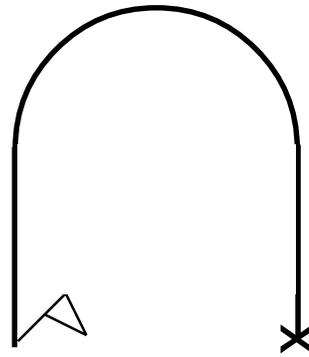


Figure 2: Incorrect serpentine track.

The purpose of serpentine tracks is to make gradual turns so that the dog is able to turn almost without realizing it right from the start. The first arcs you lay should be very gentle curves, and should remain that way for quite a while. However, I saw quite a few people who made serpentine tracks that were like “U” turns (Figure 2). If you think about it, this is exactly the same as the two right turns described above, and a beginning dog is likely to have trouble with this. If they have trouble, it means that your turns are too sharp for a beginning dog, whether the turns were curved or not.

If you have a hard time laying serpentine tracks (and many people do, so you are not alone), try the following. Plant a flag at the start. Walk straight for about 25 yards. Plant another flag. Facing in the direction you have been walking, spread both your arms straight out from your shoulders as shown in Figure 3. If you were to turn left or right in the directions your arms are pointing, these would be right angle, or 90-degree turns. The direction you are facing is 0 degrees. You want to head in a direction that is no more than 30 degrees off your heading or bearing, which is 0 degrees. If you make two 30 degree turns to the left, and then two 30 degree turns to the right, you will end up facing in the same direction you were facing at the start, and will have essentially laid a gentle serpentine track (see Figure 4). You can lay your serpentine tracks in this way instead of as a continuous arc, and you will accomplish close to the same effect.

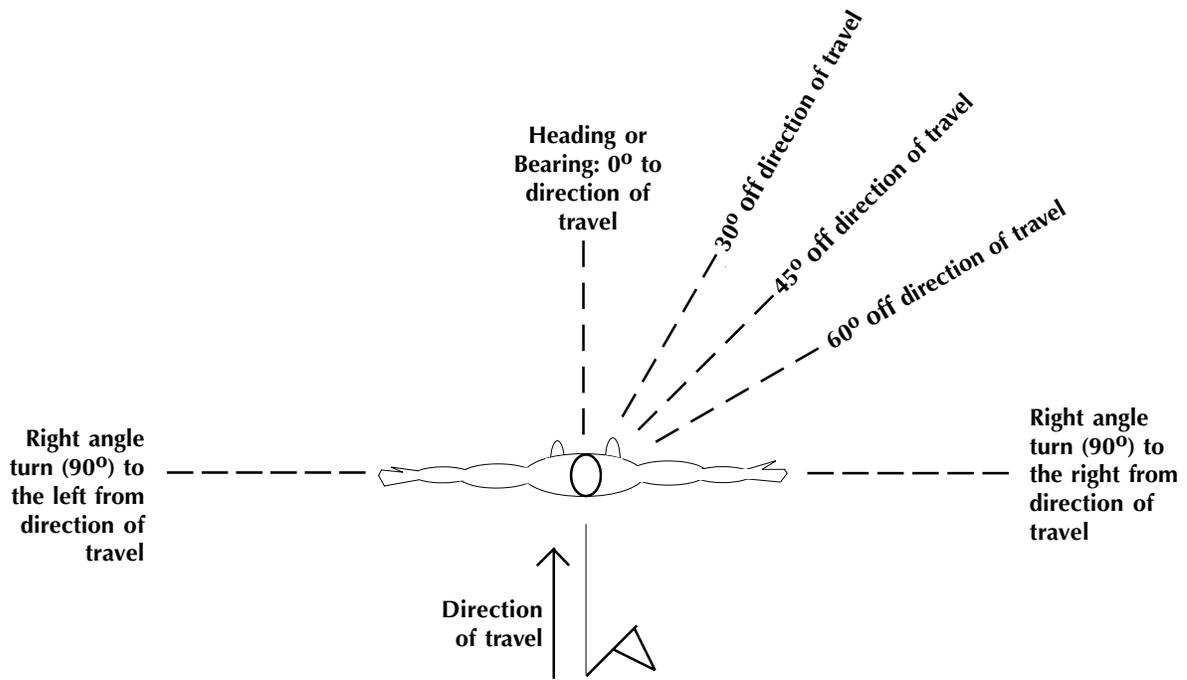


Figure 3

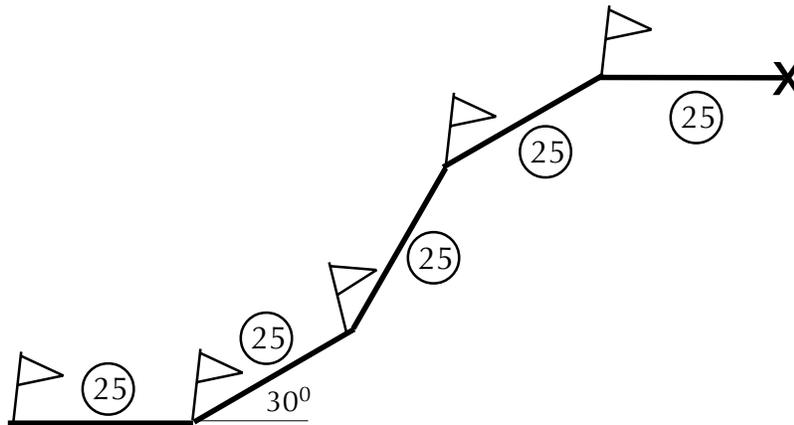


Figure 4: Laying a serpentine as a series of gentle turns

Once the dog can do a track like this, lengthen each 25' leg to 30, then 35 yards and so on until the legs are a minimum of 50 yards. Then make one of the turns 45 degrees, then two, and so on as long as the dog is not having problems. If the dog is progressing steadily, vary the length of the legs up to 100 yards and mix gentle turns with 60 degree and eventually 90 degree turns. Do not continue to make the turns sharper if the dog is having problems, and do not use acute turns (more than 90 degrees) until you and your dog are more advanced. The total number of tracks in this type of progression would be a minimum of 12-15 to assure a gradual, confident progression. It would still be best if you could curve the turns slightly at first, but the method described above will work if you find serpentes difficult.

The purpose of using serpentes is to avoid the problem often seen when using straight line methods for a long time followed by the abrupt introduction of turns, which almost always causes the dog to overshoot the corners and lose the scent. This patterns the dog to find corners by losing them. Instead, this method tries to pattern the dog to be right, and to turn so gradually that the dog is patterned to look

for the track immediately if he loses it. This makes the dog track-sure. It is essential in the early stages that you pattern the dog to be correct and gain confidence with a minimum of help from you. The more you set the dog up to fail and have to help him, the more likely it will be that the dog will look to you for help when he can't find a blind turn and you can't help him.

Shaping tracking behavior. At this early stage in your training, you should know exactly where the track is so you can help the dog to follow the track closely. The danger in this, however, is that you may actually be heavily guiding the dog and not even realize it. I see many beginners taking a walk down the track instead of tracking. The difference is important. You are taking a walk down the track if you know where the track is and keep moving along it even if the dog is not clearly indicating it. The dog can pull in any direction, but if you keep moving the dog will eventually come with you because he will be prevented from going in any other direction.

Instead of guiding the dog in this way, you must teach the dog to stay very near the track and to move down it with confidence. The way you do this is to move with the dog only when he is right on the track and moving forward. When he veers off more than a couple of feet, STOP. Say nothing, and the chances are good he will find the track again without your help (especially if you have not given him too much lead). If he is distracted, remind him to track. If he is still distracted, gently move up next to him and point to the track the way you do at the start. When he returns to the track and when he starts to move away from you along it, reestablish tension on the line (see below), let out a little line and follow, saying "good track" or "good find it." Do not praise him and do not move when he is near the track, or has his nose on it but is standing at an angle to it; wait until he is moving out along the track. In this way you shape his behavior not to air scent around the track or fringe along the track five or six feet off, but to track in the footsteps.

Line handling. In addition to the skill of waiting until your dog is on the track to move with him, you must learn how to communicate with your dog through the lead. You should keep a steady, gentle tension on the lead when the dog is moving down the track in a motivated manner. This tension is the line of communication between you and your dog. When the dog starts to move off a straight section of the track (i.e. not at a corner), you should increase the tension slightly, and as the distance increases, you should stop and hold the line taut. Do not, however, jerk or pull the dog. In the beginning, the amount of line between you and your dog should be no more than 6-10' for a small dog and 8-14' for a large dog because this keeps the dog from getting too far off the track while he is learning. As soon as he heads back towards the track, lessen the tension and, if needed, quietly encourage him back, but do not praise or follow until the dog gets back on the track, faces away from you, and moves off. When this happens, let out a little line and reestablish that slight tension, then praise and move off with the dog.

When the dog is confidently moving down the track in a straight line, that is the time when you can begin to let out a little more line. But when he moves away from the track, is confused, circles, or stops to explore something off the track, shorten up the line again. In this way, slowly, as the dog gains confidence and moves more steadily forward on the track, you can learn to work with a longer line. Before this time, using more line is more likely to be a hindrance than a help.

Learning to read your dog. The most important skill you must acquire before you are ready to work blind tracks is learning to read your dog. By this I mean you must recognize:

- What is the dog's body posture when it is tracking?
- How is it different when he is just idly sniffing?
- How does he behave when he loses the scent?
- How does he behave when he is searching for the track?
- How does he behave when he is exploring a cross-track?

For most dogs, there is a clear tracking posture: they are obviously concentrating, their nose is down and their body leans forward into the harness. Some hunch their backs slightly; some wag their tails rhythmically. Watch carefully, and learn to identify that posture. When the dog is idly sniffing something of mild interest, his head more often sweeps from side to side, and his body is more relaxed and not pulling into the harness. When your dog starts understanding corners, you will often also see a clear loss of scent indication. This is usually a fairly sudden hesitation (which you will feel in the line if you are maintaining tension) accompanied by a sudden lifting of the head. After the dog loses the scent, you will often see searching behavior. This is more concentrated than idle sniffing; usually the dog will range, sometimes circle, and sometimes they can be quite frantic about it. Then when they come across and recognize the next leg, they will pull back into the tracking posture. Some dogs do this tentatively; some look like they are being sucked onto the new leg. To be sure this is a new leg and not just searching, this is an appropriate time to let the line out, then begin to establish tension. When the dog continues in that direction, then you move with him and praise quietly. Crosstrack indication can often be recognized when the dog will be working down a leg steadily and he hits a crosstrack. He will often veer sharply and quickly off the track, lift his head after a few feet, then turn and cross the leg in the opposite direction. This turn and crossing of the leg is often a tip-off. Although crosstracks are not supposed to occur in TD tracks, unintentional (animal or human) crosstracks are a good possibility, so you need to know what the indication looks like. Learning to recognize this behavior will be easier if you can track in the snow so the crosstracks are obvious. Knowing the difference between a crosstrack indication and a turn indication can be the difference between passing and failing a test.

To summarize the importance of these skills, and their relationship to each other, I have received permission from Herb Morrison, a respected tracking judge and tracking teacher, to reprint his post on the tracking list that addressed this topic:

“Teaching students how to read their dog is one of the most important aspects of a tracking class I teach as well as learning how to handle the lead. While it is important to teach the dog to track correctly, this process is made easier if the handler learns to read the dog so as to restrain the dog at the proper time DURING TRAINING. In doing so the dog will learn that when he is on track he can pull and the handler will go with him. This is not something that is learned overnight. It requires that the handler know where the track is and learns what behaviors occur at loss and discovery of track. It also requires that the handler be patient enough to allow the dog to discover the track and not begin following the dog until he is committed.

If a dog is quartering [on] the track, many handlers will simply follow along since the dog is headed in the general direction of the end. To discourage this behavior in both the dog and handler, the dog should be gently restrained as he moves from the track and the restraint lessened as he heads back toward the track. The handler should remain still UNTIL the dog discovers the track and begins committing to a direction. If the direction is correct, the handler should be still but allow the dog to take out lead. At this point slight tension is applied and as the dog leans into the harness tension is lessened and the handler follows. This will teach both dog and handler cues that will aid the dog and handler in training as well as in a test situation.

We really only have control over two things in our tracking training: design of the track and means of motivation. Motivation will differ from dog to dog. All too often we are too anxious to see what the dog can do and do not lay a good foundation for the dog and as a result create more problems.”