

Training Tip.....Starting a Trailing Dog

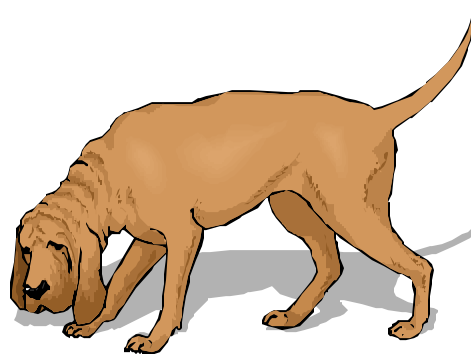
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Please keep in mind that this is only one of many possible training methods.

The initial training for the young puppy (or untrained dog) involves making associations. The puppy has no idea what this new game involves. We tell handlers to start from the initial session with the routine, commands, and equipment that they will be using throughout the dog's career. The puppy will begin to associate all of these things with the game of trailing.

We want to have a trailing harness from the beginning. With a puppy, you will have to have several as the puppy grows but use a similar style and associate it only with trailing. We want a harness the puppy can pull into. It is of personal preference as to whether you use a nylon or leather harness. You may also want to have a shabrak for your dog to wear under or over his harness. The puppy will quickly learn the routine having its harness and/or shabrak put on as a signal that it is going to trail. Most of us offer the dog a drink of water immediately after harnessing it. This also is part of the routine and the dog comes to expect it. We start offering the puppy a scent guide at the very first training. We recognize that this doesn't mean anything yet to the puppy but we are establishing the routine. We also give commands although at this time they are meaningless to the puppy.

Very few commands are needed for trailing but you must decide on them before the first session and be consistent in using them. There is a command to tell the dog to take scent from the scent guide. "Smell" is the command I use. There is the command to start trailing. I use "Find 'em". There is the command to return to work after a break. I use "Back to work". There is "Leave it" for when I think the dog is crittering. If the dog has lost the scent and we need to return to where the dog last had scent, I use "Let's go back", And if the dog is working out a turn, there is "Which way?"



For the initial training, you should only need the commands for taking scent and trailing. Only give these commands once. You don't want to nag your dog with continual exposure to the scent guide. The dog will remember the scent you have given him. In addition, you don't want to repeat the start trailing command on the trail. If your subject's scent is no longer there because your dog has lost the trail, it may pick up on someone else's scent and trail the wrong person when you command it again. Save your starting command for your initial firing of the dog and use another phrase to go back to work. Don't nag your dog. Except for praise at the end, the less you say, the better.

Our first few sessions with a new puppy involve short runaways. We are not concerned that the puppy is using its eyes to make the find. Remember that we are making associations at this stage of the training. We often do three repetitions in a training session, however three is not a magic number. It is better to stop on one or two successful runaways than to do too many. For a young puppy or shy dog, the subject may be the handler with an assistant working the dog. The runaway is very similar to an air scent beginning runaway except the commands and equipment are different. The subject gets the puppy's attention and runs a short distance ducking out of sight behind a tree or a bush. We do expose the puppy to the scent guide from the very beginning. For the next few training sessions, you may want to use the spouse or another family member as the subject and gradually introduce team members or strangers as the subject. With outgoing puppies and dogs, you can successfully start with strangers.

One thing we do not do is change subjects during a training session. We want our dogs to be committed to the scent of their subject so during training we don't want to confuse them by changing subjects. This may well be superstitious behavior on our part but it works for us.

Even with these beginning runaways, we like to set them up on a trail or along a brush line so the scent is held in a channel. If done out in the middle of a field, the scent will be spread out. These initial runaways are all straight and short. After five or six sessions, spread over two or three weeks, we will start to introduce turns. The initial turn is a gradual curve into the wind to get the puppy to use its nose. Slowly add more turns. At this point, you should notice your puppy using its nose on these simple problems. You should also be gradually lengthening these problems. The subject should now be walking away, not running. If your puppy has difficulty, go back to basics.

By the twelfth session, you should be able to start aging the trails. One method we have found to be successful is to double lay new scent over old scent. This means to lay a trail in the evening, return in the morning and re-lay fresh scent over the previous scent. The old scent seems to settle and hold in place better than the fresher scent. We have found scent up to half an hour old tends not to settle well. By having the old scent already in place, the puppy finds it easier to trail the 10 to 15 minute scent of a slightly aged trail. We will only do this a few times.

Around the fifteenth session, you may want to introduce split trails. We have two people walk together and then split off in opposite directions. You scent the puppy on one of the subjects. Because you are introducing something new, the trail should be short and there should only be the one turn where the people separated. If your puppy takes the wrong turn gently tell it is wrong and guide it back onto the correct scent. You may want to set this problem up so the correct trail has the subject upwind of the puppy.

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At subsequent sessions, you should also start introducing other firsts to your puppy. By now your puppy may not be seeing the subject leave as you gradually age the trails. You can introduce starting your puppy a short distance away from where the subject walked and let him find the track. You can start working around buildings and on hard surfaces. Your trails should be longer, maybe a quarter mile to a half-mile in length. You are now using a variety of people as subjects and a variety of materials as scent guides. Remember that whenever you introduce something new, lower your criteria. Don't introduce a number of firsts all on one trail or at one training session. Most of your training trails should be easy to keep motivation high with only one or two difficult trails out of ten.

At this point in your training, your puppy should have a solid foundation. Now is the time to learn to read your dog. You should expect to have worked 100 or so trails in training before you will be ready to take a mission ready test. Don't fall into the trap of designing your training to meet the sign-offs. There is much more to trailing than the sign-offs. Use your imagination in coming up with new training scenarios. Some things to consider teaching your dog are: a specific indicator to identify the subject such as a sit in front, working highly contaminated areas, working scent pools, articles on the trail, trailing from a vehicle, trailing into buildings, trailing into water, trailing with or after another dog, jump trails, identifying trail or no trail, working trails several miles in length, working trails several days old. Work blind trails as well as known trails. On the blind trails, take someone with you who knows where the trail goes. Learn, learn, learn.