

Editor note: The style of tracking in this article is: exploratory predator style tracking or sight run

Getting started with Hard Surface tracking

Sgt. Richard Gunter, Certified Master Trainer

I know we have all ran into roadblocks regarding canine tracking, or some of us have just had a hard time tracking on hard surface. Hopefully, this article will help educate handlers and trainers on hard surface tracking technics I use. I have used these technics for over 20 years with great results. Using these methods will help prevent us from handicapping (restricting) our canine teams and will assist in advancing them faster. As police canine teams, we should have the most advanced dogs of any canine field. The public is counting on us to protect them from the criminal element, and find that missing child, or elderly adult. I have been told more than once, that these tracking techniques were too advanced for the basic canine handler. I disagree. I believe we tend to learn at the level that is expected of us, as will our canine counter parts. I have trained many handlers and dogs using this concept.

I still remember the first two statements I learned as a new canine handler; 1) Our job is to guide and associate a qualified canine into a given response. 2) For training to be effective it must be humane, consistent, and rewarded. I have always gone back to these two principles whenever I have been stumped. Everything in these two sentences should be very basic to most of us. Let's look at the key factor of principle: identifying a qualified canine.

Qualified canine - If we are truly looking for a Police canine for the type of tracking we will be expected to perform, we shouldn't be looking for Sport dogs that have been converted to Police dogs. Sport dogs are normally trained using food and tend to be very slow and methodical. This type of food driven training results in the canine's tracking response being too slow for police work. In identifying a qualified police dog, we are looking for a dog that will literally want to track to the ends of the earth to find its prey (prey driven). For example, when we throw a ball, we engage the dog's natural prey drive to chase and retrieve the ball. This type dog is very anxious to engage moving objects and will tend to stay focused on the task of retrieving the objects even when other obstacles are present.

Now that we have identified this type of dog best qualified for this style of tracking, let's look at some basic techniques.

Tracking Exercise 1:

Track 1-Should be done in an area with no distractions. The track should start about 20 feet from the corner of a building or behind cover near an open pave or concrete parking lot. Let a decoy/helper that builds the most prey drive either by ball, sleeve or behavior run off a short distance in a straight line up wind about 20 yards and hide behind a natural or placed object on the paved area. These tracks should

all be known to the handler but not seen or known to the dog. The helper should make exaggerated movements so the dogs get excited and his prey drive is engaged. As soon as the helper gets in place, tell the canine to track and feed him out on the lead of a minimum 15 feet. Don't force the dog to place their head down. Let them find the helper naturally; the key is to let them figure it out. The dog shouldn't be able to see the decoy, so when he finds him, make the reward fast and fun. This could be in the form of a controlled bite, throwing the ball or playing tug. I can't express how important it is to make a big deal when the canine makes it to the end, and to have fun keeping the dog in prey. The dog must always be able to win the game.

What to expect when first starting to use this method, even a dog with a high prey drive that hasn't been shown he can use his nose to find his prey, will tend to try and use his eyes first (until he learns the fastest way is to use his nose). Remember, we are not teaching the dog to track we are allowing him to do what he does naturally (we don't teach a dog to sit, lie down or roll over).

Tracking Exercise 2:

Track 2- Start from track one's ending location. Once again, hold the dog and have the helper run off (I stroke and encourage the dog talking to him "Where did he go?" "You going to get him?" in a soft tone like it's a secret). Repeat tracking exercise one but this time make the helper go even further, 30 or 40 yards. Each time the dog should have to work harder and harder to find the helper and he will have to use his nose not dumb luck or eyes to find the helper. Don't be concerned with the dog's nose position with this type of tracking. The dog will place his nose where it's the most comfortable and effective. As the tracks get tougher, the dog will adjust his head. Our job is to keep it fun, challenging, and keep the dog in prey always allowing the dogs to win. As the dog advances, the tracks should be run in all wind conditions upwind and downwind. You will notice when the scent is downwind and downhill, the dog holds his nose closer to the surface.

Don't introduce the canine to anything other than pavement at this point. You want to make the canine think the norm is tracking on pavement. He will stay with the strongest part of the odor even when vegetation is close. He will learn that human scent leads him to his prey. Later when we introduce vegetation, it will be almost as if he is air scenting the odor. He will be conditioned to concentrate on more minute amounts of odor. As the canine advances we can introduce him to turns, and distractions as we would with any other training.

Once the dog get to where he can run a mile track with at least 4 turn on all pavement. I throw in some type of gravel or grass cross track. Start increasing the vegetation until I get a working mixture of multiple surfaces. This technique can also work on dogs that are already tracking well but are having issues with hard surface tracking.