

Training the Track: My approach

By Tawna Skinner

“Versatile” dogs, of which the Cesky Fousek is but one of many breeds, were developed in the 17 and 18th centuries for the “foot” hunter, who pursued all types of game for the table, almost on a daily basis. These breeds were developed as “do it all” dogs, expected to be a hunting helper that could find and point upland birds, track and trail rabbits, foxes and other “fur” and cooperatively retrieve anything and everything on land and water, as well as having a friendly, people-oriented temperament.

To this day, “versatile” dogs are expected to have and exhibit these aforementioned natural abilities. In our club, we test our young dogs twice, in a hunt like setting, to determine whether our dogs will exhibit these natural abilities when given the opportunity.

The caveat here is that our dogs come with the “potential” for exhibiting and using these natural traits, but to be a worthwhile hunting companion and to be able to do well in a hunt test situation a dog’s natural ability needs to be developed prior to hunting or testing.

In the past, lots of time spent in the field hunting all types of game gave the dog “experience” to develop skills. Hunting rabbits gave the dog opportunity to develop their tracking/trailing skills or being a ‘less than accurate’ shooter gave opportunity for the dog to track down wounded pheasants or other birds.

These days are different. Most of us do not hunt rabbits. Upland bird hunting seasons are short and controlled and most of us want to “hunt” not “train” during those seasons. During much of the year we dog owners are limited in time and in land and water to train on. Then there are the birds: wild birds are generally only available in season and pen-raised birds are expensive and at times hard to come by. So how does one help a dog develop those innate abilities in today’s conditions?

Over the years I have acquired, developed and used a number of approaches to train my dogs to be effective hunters despite limitations of time, land, water and birds. In this article I am going to share a method for developing your dog’s tracking ability for wherever you live and within your situational constraints.

In tracking, we want the dog to be calm, focused, attentive, persistent and efficient. We want the dog to be able to recognize game bird scent, its strength and to be able to discriminate that scent from the myriad other scents in the same area. We want them to know that ground/foot scent can lead them to a bird or other game.

Prior to starting this training, you need to have introduced your dog to a dead game bird of the type you want to train tracking for, such as a pheasant or duck so that the dog knows and recognizes the scent.

When training for tracking, I do not use live birds let loose to run off. This encourages young dogs to search because the ground scent is minimal and unevenly spaced and the dog does not know what you want them to do. So, they do what they think is best and what has yielded results before, which is, generally, searching. Using live birds is also expensive, as it takes several experiences for the dog to understand that following ground scent is what you want them to do. I want them to learn this “tracking” method of finding a bird, as opposed to searching, so that when presented with the opportunity they have another skill, besides searching, to use. I also want the training to be in a controlled situation so that I know where the track is and I can see what the dog is doing.

Procedure:

First gather up the necessary supplies. You will need a harness that fits your dog, a long line/check cord of about 20’ in length, a canvas dummy or Dokken bird and a bottle of liquid scent of your choice. A dead, cold (but not frozen) game bird of choice can also be used. In addition, you will need a method to mark the track line so you know exactly where it is. Rocks, flagging, flag pins, or stakes will work. Also bring your training treats and clicker, if you use them.

Next, find a place to train that has short green grass or other short vegetation, that is safe for you and your dog and has little or no distractions. Your backyard is a good place to start or a local park, school yard, cut hay field, etc. The area being enclosed is also helpful in the beginning.

Go out to the area you have chosen and mark (with something like flagging, rocks, flag pins, stakes) a 20-30 yd. straight path. Because we cannot scent like a dog it is important to mark the path visually so that we can tell, without a doubt, where the track is. These first few times must be short and very controlled. The wind direction is not too important at this point, but setting the track up into the wind is best in the beginning.

After marking the path, set up the track. At the beginning (if you have a dead bird) remove a few feathers and place at the start, otherwise, just rub the scented dummy on the ground to make a hot spot. Mark the start with something. Drag the dead bird or dummy down the path and leave it at the end. Bring the dog up to within 5 ft. of the starting point. Make sure the dog has a flat collar or harness on, with the long line attached. Have the dog sit/stay for a short time (1-3 minutes) for you both to calm down. (If you have not taught your dog Sit/Stay you need to do that as it is the best method for teaching” temperament control”. Because calm, focused attention to the track is imperative for success a dog needs to be able to manage their temperament in an exciting situation.)

Grab the collar with your left hand and with the cord also in your hand bring the dog to the start. Lean down and pat the ground with your right hand at the start point, giving your dog a short command like "fetch" or "track". Continue forward, patting the ground for a few feet, until the dog is starting to focus on the ground scent and move forward on its own. At this point you can release the collar, **but not the long line.** You are going to follow along with the dog to the end of the track. When the dog finds the bird or dummy you will praise and give a treat.” If the dog

knows a retrieve command you can give that command and as soon as he picks it up you will jog back to the start. Back at the start have the dog sit and give you the bird/dummy. Give the dog praise and click and treat. Go put the dog away for 10 minutes while you set up a new track. You will do 1-2 more tracks just like above and end for the day.

If the dog wants to go really fast or move way off the track, bring the dog back to the track and pat the ground again to get him/her to focus on the ground scent. Do not allow the dog to come off the track more than 3-4 feet on either side. With a big strong dog that is eager, this can take some doing. Try not to get angry or frustrated. Just stop and bring the dog back to the track, pat the ground and repeat your command. You being calm will help the dog be calm.

Next day you can set up the situation the same way, keeping hold of the long line to the end. If the dog goes down the track to the bird quickly and efficiently you know he/she knows how to track. When the dog is consistently following the track, **on line**, without veering off or going into search mode, you are going to stop and let go of the rope, as soon as the dog is focused on the track and moving forward on its own, When the dog gets to the bird and picks it up and brings it to you "Click" and give a big treat. He knows how to do this. (If the dog does not return with the bird, do not reprimand the dog. You do not want the dog to equate this exercise with an unpleasant experience. Not returning with the bird is a retrieving issue and not a tracking issue and needs to be worked on separately. Also, young pups may not yet know how to retrieve to hand so finding the bird at the end is all that is required.)

Have him do one more track in the same manner, but a bit longer. Make sure these tracks are straight for the beginning experiences. If he is not going straight down the track on his own go back to going with him, holding the long line.

If he has demonstrated that he has "got it" you can, the next day, set up the same situation as day 2, but with the track being a little longer. For the first 3 days, all the tracks should be in the same area. Then you are going to take a 3-day break before you do this again. Solidification of what was learned (latent learning) will take place during this time.

Once the dogs understand what you want and how to do it, progress will be fast. The next time you practice, you can change the criteria a bit by changing **only one thing**: use a different bird or scent, longer distance, or new place. Over time you can add a single bend to the track and lengthen it out, progressively, to 100 yds. Always reward the retrieve to hand. Getting the bird back is more important than how it looks. You can work on preciseness in retrieving in a different lesson.

It is easy to overdo this practice. Some dogs, once they know how to do this, get bored quickly and will get distracted from what they are supposed to do. Make sure that the reward at the end has higher value than other distractions. Practice this in an area that has little or no other distractions, i.e. other dogs, people, kids, animals, birds etc. If at any time the dog goes into search mode, put the long line back on and back up to a more controlled situation. Do not

practice with free running birds. Make sure your command for tracking is different than your command for blind retrieves which require a dog to search.

This approach to training the track can serve as a basis for following a drag track (which is essentially what you are teaching), wounded game bird tracking and for duck track on water. If a dog can track a duck on land it will be able to better accomplish it on water. The great thing about this method is that it can be done almost anywhere, anytime of the year, with less expense, time and without the need for live game birds.

Happy Training!