

Getting Started: Tracking with



Teresa Keenan and Nara on a track.

Tracking is a sport in which the PBGV's independence, intelligence, determination and keen scenting abilities are put to good use. It is not surprising that many PBGVs excel in activities such as tracking, search and rescue, and hunting that use these talents. Tracking is a splendid sport for those who enjoy being outdoors with their dogs and who marvel at a dog's ability to succeed at tasks which must forever remain an essential mystery to human beings. The teamwork involved in following a dog on a track is an experience that everyone who loves dogs should have.

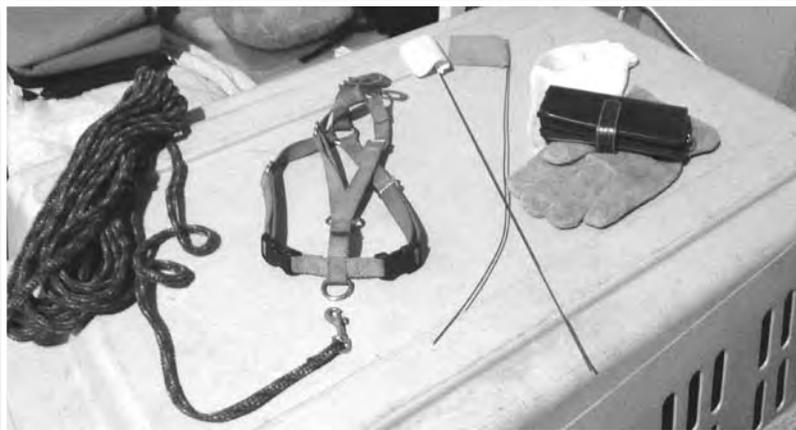
This article is a brief introduction to teaching your PBGV the skills it will need to prepare for an AKC tracking test. PBs already know how to use their noses to follow a scent; what we need to do is teach them the rules of the game and how to focus their talents toward a common goal: passing an AKC Tracking Dog Test (TD). For those of you who don't know, AKC tracking is a non-competitive sport in which your dog follows an unmarked course of human scent through a field. To gain the TD title, a dog must pass one test. The test is usually about a quarter mile in length, with three to five turns, aged between one-half and two-hours old and has a glove at the end.

My tracking philosophy is one of motivation. I want the dog to want to find the glove at the end of the track. The methods I discuss in this article are not the only way to train your PBGV. Always listen to what your dog is telling you and alter your training as necessary. Every dog is unique in temperament, ability, intelligence, lifestyle and health. Don't let anyone tell you there is only one true way to train. If something doesn't work for your dog, then don't do

it anymore! The method I will describe can be modified to accommodate your dog's unique qualities as well as your physical location. Consider it a general guide, not an absolute procedure for every dog and every situation.

Equipment. You will need a non-restrictive harness (no strap over the shoulders), a long line (approximately 40 feet is recommended), a couple of articles (a sock or bandana and a glove), a few survey flags or stakes that you can use to mark your track and lots of tasty treats (small, soft and easy to chew). See photo below.

First Tracks. First you need to find a place to track. You can track anyplace and across any type of terrain; however, a location that is less-traveled by people, other dogs and bunnies will have fewer distractions and will make learning easier. Begin by placing a flag to mark the start. Next to the flag, lightly stamp your feet so you create a concentrated scent pad, a small triangular shaped area of disturbed grass. Situate the triangle so it points toward the direction of the track. Set one of your cloth articles in the center of the triangle and sprinkle some of your treats inside the triangle.



Tracking equipment includes a non-restrictive harness and a long line, scent articles like a sock or glove, a few survey flags to mark your track and lots of tasty treats.

your PBGV

Be sure to place some on top of the article and concentrate more treats at the point leading to the track. Then walking in a normal fashion, move forward in a straight line, leaving a small treat in the toe print of each step. After about 10 steps, place another flag to mark the end, set the glove on the ground and place a small pile of treats on top of the glove. Continue walking forward a few more steps, then circle back away from the track you want your dog to follow.

Get your dog, put its harness on and clip the long line to his collar. Walk him up to the start flag. At the flag remove the long line from the collar and clip it on to the harness. If necessary, point out the treats at the start and quietly give your dog a cue word for tracking. Many people use "track" or "find it." Then quietly let your dog find and follow the treats. In the beginning, stay close to your dog, but always remember, in this game the dog is the leader. So stay behind him and only move forward when he is moving forward in the correct direction along the track.

The key points you are teaching your dog in these first few tracks are: 1. When the harness and/or special long lead goes on, the tracking game begins. 2. Take your time and focus at the start. 3. Use your nose to follow a specific scent (at this point it's the scent of the treats) and you will find a jackpot at the end (the glove with more treats).

For those who do not use collars for walks or training and instead use harnesses, a gentle leader or other type of lead, keep in mind you can do whatever works for you and your dog concerning the signal that you are going to use to start tracking and when you are finished. Just be consistent and use the same signal every time. However, the harness and long lead are essential. Some people sing to their dog as they approach the flag, some people ask their dog to down at the start before beginning, some people are fine with just using a particular command for tracking or the dog may just recognize the long lead. The same at the end — every team needs to develop its own routine to let the dog know they are no longer working. For me it's a special food reward and taking off the harness. In practice, I usually let her run off leash at the end. We obviously don't do that at a test or if we are tracking in an urban setting, but that's just one track out of many so she doesn't seem adversely affected by not getting her freedom every once in a while.

More Tracks. Try to track with your PBGV at least once a week if possible. Follow the same basic procedure as you did in your first tracks, but gradually increase the length of the track. Also gradually reduce the amount of food on the track and reduce the size of the scent pad at the start. As the food is reduced, your PBGV will quickly learn that in order to get the treats it has to follow the scent of the tracklayer. Before you know it your dog will be able to follow a 50- to 100-yard-long track with just a few rewards along the way.

PBGVs are very intelligent and may get bored easily so you want to keep challenging them with your tracking training. Train in different places, different times of day and in different weather conditions. Increase the length of the track, vary the amount and how often you leave food on the track, and vary the amount of time you let the track "age" between the time you lay it and you let your dog run it.

Corners. Once your dog understands the general concept of tracking and is easily following a straight path, it is time to introduce corners. Begin by making a gentle arc, then gradually increase the sharpness of the angle until your dog can successfully navigate a 90-degree or right-angle corner. Practice corners in each direction, and include a variety of types of corners as your training progresses. When introducing a new element to your track, you may have to reduce the difficulty of other elements to give your dog a chance to concentrate on the new piece of the puzzle. You might increase the amount of food in the area where the corner is, for example, or you might follow more closely behind your dog or make the overall length of the track shorter.

It is very important to know where the track is so that you can help your dog when necessary and so you will not interfere with your dog's progress. PBs are smart and independent; one of the quickest ways to reduce the motivation of your dog is to tell them they are incorrect when in fact they know exactly where the track goes and it is you who is mistaken. Survey flags or stakes can be used to mark the location of corners to aid the human half of the team during training. It is, however, a good idea to remove these as quickly as possible and learn to use natural landmarks instead. Just like our PBGVs need to learn to track without the help of food, we too need to learn to follow our dogs on the track without the aid of visual cues.

Articles. Up to this point there have been articles on the track, but we have not really done much with them. We have had a start article and an end article with a food reward, but we have not really told the dog what we expect them to do with these articles. In order to pass an AKC tracking test the dog must find and indicate the final article in a TD track. The rules do not specify how the dog must indicate, only that it must do so. Therefore, I like to let the dog determine how they would prefer to "show me" the articles. I take whatever behavior the dog naturally does when encountering an article and try to shape that into something more obvious and consistent. If you have a dog that loves to play tug or to retrieve, you have an easy job teaching it to indicate an article — you simply encourage the play or the retrieve when the dog finds the article and the article itself soon becomes a great reward for the dog.

You may, however, discover that your PBGV finds more reward in the act of tracking and would prefer not to be interrupted by those silly articles that get in its way. If this is the case, you may have to spend more time teaching your dog that articles are important. I prefer to teach the article indication away from the track and then incorporate it into the game of tracking after we have a solid indication. I scatter a few articles around on the floor or in the yard and then use a clicker to shape the behavior that I want. I add a verbal cue to the behavior, which I then use as an aid to remind the dog of the behavior I'm looking for when it finds an article on the track.

Reading the Dog and Line Handling. While you are training your dog to track, you will be training yourself as well. You will eventually be working *continued on next page*

Tracking *continued from page 29* a minimum of 20 feet behind your dog. You will need to learn to handle the tracking line so it provides a communication link between you and the dog and so the line does not interfere with the dog while it's working. Generally, it is a good idea to handle the lead so there is a slight amount of tension between you and the dog when it is tracking. Depending upon the specific dog, use just enough tension so if the dog slows down or changes direction it can be detected by your feel of the lead. When the lead goes slack, pull the excess toward you to maintain some tension. Be careful not to jerk the lead or otherwise send a signal to the dog that something is wrong. If there is potential danger or a distraction of some sort, you can increase the tension to restrain the dog.

to make sure you have taught your dog how to handle some of the different situations that might come up during a track. Two of the most obvious and important things to do now is to expose him to different tracklayers and to track in different places under different conditions. Be sure you both can successfully navigate a "blind track" (a track which the handler does not know where it goes) that is 500-yards long, has multiple corners and has been aged at least an hour old.

Don't throw too many new things at him at once, but allow him to learn to track under different conditions. Remember, PBs are intelligent and enjoy solving problems; keep it interesting so the dog doesn't get bored but don't overdo it. Also remember that motivation is the key. Keep in mind that what is motivating in some situations may not be



1, 2. Place a flag to mark the start. Use your feet to create a triangular-shape; set an article and treats inside the triangle.
3. Walk forward, leaving a treat in the toe print of each step.

4. Place another flag to mark the end, set the glove on the ground with treats on top of the glove.

A great way to learn how to handle the tracking line is to practice with two people and no dogs. One person (acting as the "dog"), ties the lead around the waist and walks forward in an erratic manner. The handler can then practice handling the lead without sending negative messages to the real dog. This sounds a bit silly but it really works; try it!

During your practice tracks you have been observing your dog. Its behavior and body language will tell you when it is hot on the trail and is tracking, when it has lost the scent and is searching for it and when it has stopped tracking and has started searching for bunnies. When the dog has indicated loss of track, it is a good idea to stop or even back up a few steps. This will give the dog a chance to search the area and pick up the scent again.

Putting it all together. Before you enter an AKC tracking test there are a few things to remember. You want

in others. Food rewards along the track may be a great motivator for your dog while the tracks are aged only a short time. If you live in an area that contains fire ants or has an abundance of yellow jackets, that same food can suddenly become a deterrent. Being stung or bitten is definitely not a reward. Remember to consider your particular area and how your dog responds to varying conditions when planning your training efforts.

When your PBGV has shown it can track under different conditions and can complete a full length track, it is ready for certification. Any tracking judge can do this, although the AKC may make special provisions if there are no judges in your area. For more information visit the AKC web site www.akc.org/press_center/facts_stats.cfm?page=12. ■

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