

Chapter One

INTRODUCTION

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Arrogant.
Brazen.
Brash.
Cheeky.
Cocky.
Egotistical.
Presumptuous.

We humans are all of this and more, when we set out to teach a dog to track. He *knows* how to track. His nose is constantly working, whether it's figuring out which burrow the rabbit bolted down, or locating the bit of toast that fell off the kitchen table. Turn him loose in a grassy meadow, and his nose will immediately spring into action. Who's been here? What's that over there? Now *this* is interesting!

His nose feeds him far more information than his eyes. Watch him as he cruises the field, head low. He is clearly following scent trails.

He *knows* how to track.

What can you possibly teach him?

You can teach him to share this marvelous skill with you, to allow you to be there with him, contributing what you can, while he uses that amazing nose to follow a scent. And if you're successful at convincing him to let you join the fun, oh! what fun it is.

Most dog training depends on curbing a dog's natural instincts. You'd never succeed in obedience trials or agility competitions if you let your dog do each exercise the way he wanted to. But tracking encourages those instincts, a plus for owners who are turned off by the intricate rules and polished precision of most dog sports.

Anyone who lives with a dog knows he has natural abilities, instincts, behaviors. Some we enjoy. Wagging his tail, nudging us to be petted, fetching a tennis ball. Some, every bit as natural, are obnoxious in our constricted lives, like digging, barking, chewing, marking his territory.

Sniffing is no exception. It can be entertaining (when he finds the tennis ball you've hidden under the couch cushion) or appalling (when he abruptly gooses Aunt Edna in the crotch). Tracking takes this natural action and refines it, in much the same way that we channel other canine activities so the dog is more enjoyable to be with. Ask anyone who tracks his dog and you'll find a deep bond.

To a dog, tracking is all about fun things.

Things we would normally discourage. Sniffing. Pulling hard on the lead. Charging out at full power. When tracking, he not only gets to do all these fun things, but he gets rewarded for doing so! It's no wonder dogs exposed to tracking love it.

Tracking dogs sniff out gloves for praise and cookies. This is the same skill that dogs use to sniff out drugs, weapons, bombs, gas leaks, even cadavers. To the dog it's all scent work, whether the end product is a milk bone, a strip of leather, or a stash of cocaine.

Tracking is the only dog activity I know where you don't need tons of knowledge to be successful. Your dog already knows more about this than you ever will, no matter how many books you read or how many dogs you work.

If you feel dog events have too many rules, you'll love tracking. There are a tenth the rules of Newfoundland water or draft tests, one hundredth the rules of obedience trials.

Tracking isn't a matter of teaching. Rather, it's a matter of exposure. Expose your dog to enough circumstances and situations in his training, and he (and you) will learn through his experimentation. Tracking is the only activity I can think of where you can literally blank out and just hold onto the lead and follow, and it is entirely possible for the dog to earn the title you've been working toward.

Then why such a fat book? Because it's a lot more fun if you're an active, helpful part of the team. You'll get a lot more out of tracking if you have an idea what he's doing. And the more advanced you get in this work, the more you'll be able to actively contribute. Advanced tracking requires both members of the team to have their wits about them!

Please don't let the size of this book scare you. Think of this book as a cookbook. Basic cooking is very simple. And you don't need to master all the contents of a cookbook before you begin cooking. You can cook quite adequately using only small portions of the book. And some of the book you may never need. But if you get hungry for devil's food cake, or your house guest from England requests a batch of popovers, the help you need will be within its pages. And if you really get turned on to cooking, there's enough content to keep your stomach purring for life.

Know what I like about tracking? We humans are so damned egotistical that we need to be taken down a peg now and then. Tracking encourages a

healthy, modest ego. It quickly deflates the pompous. It teaches us humility. Swelled heads and control freaks don't last long as trackers. They can't handle the dog being in charge. And they can't stand knowing he's the brighter member of the team. Not to mention having it clearly demonstrated to everyone else in the vicinity!

Tracking forces you outdoors. And tracking knows no season. So you get into fields that change from month to month. The countryside is gorgeous blanketed in snow. It's equally lovely when the cherry trees blossom pink and white, when the sunny daffodils pop up in the field, when the lupine or bluebonnets are in full bloom.

Track in a field, and you may see hawks, deer, rabbits, coyote, fox. As society gets more crowded, tracking encourages you to find less populous places. It de-stresses a portion of your life.

Watching a dog's nose in action will amaze you. It is awesome to see a dog pick out a human scent and follow where that person has walked previously, through meadows and woods, across streams and through gravel, up cliffs and through gullies. There is not a lot in life that can fill one with awe. But watching a good-nosed dog can blow your mind.

Dogs travel through life on their noses as much as they do on their feet. In tracking, the dog follows a specific scent over an unknown course. It's akin to search and rescue, only it's much lower-key, for lives are not at stake. The human is a glorified follower, walking along at the end of the lead. But there is much for the human to learn to best help his dog. It is the joint learning, the sharing, the deep companionship that develops in field work, that makes tracking so addictive, and so euphoric, for dog and for man.

Tracking was introduced in the United States in 1930. In 1935 it became one of the exercises necessary to earn an AKC utility title. Nine months later it was separated from utility and stood on its own. Then you needed a tracking title before you could *enter* utility. That lasted roughly ten years. Now it stands separate from obedience.

While it seems strange to think of tracking as a requirement for a utility title, it did demonstrate that the AKC was confident that any breed could successfully track. And that has amply proven to be true. Go to a tracking test and you'll see burly rottweilers and dainty papillons. You'll see robust Danes and immaculate Lhasas. You'll see sleek whippets and frothy old English. And yes, you'll see Newfoundlands.

Do some breeds have more aptitude than others? Of course. That's what selective breeding is all about. Picture a greyhound and a basset. Both are dogs. Both can run. But there's a definite difference in speed and in grace. Scenting is like that, too.

Some individual lines within a breed have more aptitude than others. Some possess more instinct, more drive, a quicker learning curve. And while not every dog is genetically a great tracker, motivation allows you to create the desire to track in any dog who's physically able.

All dogs have a nose. All can ferret out scent. It is appalling stupidity to state that a particular breed cannot track.

Is the handler a factor in the dog's success? Absolutely. Patient trainers can work wonders with even the most recalcitrant dog. Trainers who are impatient and who have a quick flash point will show that bad temper rather quickly, and their dogs rarely become competent or happy trackers.

How can you tell if your dog has a gifted nose? House and park behavior is often a clue. Can he find the one piece of popcorn that fell off the counter? Can he immediately locate the tennis ball you lobbed into the pile of leaves?

How well his nose works is half the story. How he takes to learning is equally important. Does he love learning new games? Is he easy to motivate? Then training for tracking will be twice as easy, and success just about guaranteed. Even if his nose isn't the best thing to come down the pike since sliced bread.

If you haven't seen any aptitude in his day to day routines, don't despair. Start tracking, and that skill may surface with a vengeance. And another killer tracker is born!

In this book you'll find many methods for each aspect of tracking. I *strongly* advise you to consider each idea presented in light of your own experience with your dog. And, within reason, only do what seems comfortable to you.

Choose a method that makes you smile in anticipation, and that you can introduce to your dog with a positive attitude. If there's a suggestion here (or in *any* book) that seems wrong or that you are uncomfortable with or cannot seem to grasp, it will not work for you. Even if it works beautifully for someone else. The reason? Dogs are intuitive, and they *always* know your emotions and thoughts. If you're uncertain, your dog will pick up on that, and since you can't show him clearly and convincingly what you wish, he'll only get confused himself. If you're uncomfortable with the method, he'll pick up on *that*, and why should he conform to something that you obviously don't believe in and aren't doing with authority and confidence? You have to be confident for him to enter happily into something new. You'd never get your six year old to try summer camp if you weren't upbeat in your description and positive in your approach. One note of doubt in your voice, and forget it. He'll be glued to your couch all summer.

Well, have I whetted your interest? Then enough of this introduction. Let's get started!