



# BMDCA Info Series

## Bernese Mountain Dogs And Tracking

2009 #6

**Introduction** ► Tracking is a basic form of search and rescue utilizing the instinctive canine scenting ability. Tracking usually takes place in fields and woods, and Bernese Mountain Dogs enthusiastically take to this sport. Bernese love having a job to do, and Tracking is one of the most natural! The challenge is to teach the dogs to follow a specific scent trail, one of our choosing instead of theirs. And, as an added bonus, partners at both ends of the leash will benefit from all of the exercise involved.

AKC Tracking events demonstrate that a dog can follow a human scent trail through a myriad of other scents to locate a lost article, such as a glove or wallet. In a Tracking Test, the trail or "track" is laid by a tracklayer who is a stranger to the dog. The handler follows at least 20 feet behind the dog on a long lead and can give verbal encouragement. Finding the article dropped by the tracklayer indicates the end of the track. The dog has then demonstrated scenting ability and the perseverance to follow a track under a variety of conditions and, if in a test, would have earned a TD title.



**AKC Titles** ► The AKC offers several Tracking titles.

- **Tracking Dog (TD):** A dog earns a TD by following a track on moderate terrain that is 440 to 500 yards long. A total of three (3) to five (5) turns either right or left must be used. The length of each of the legs must be at least 50 yards long. The track is laid by a human tracklayer and is "aged" (time period between when the scent was laid and the tracking begins) 30 minutes to 2 hours before the dog begins scenting. The dog must indicate the article at the end of the track.
- **Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX):** The TDX is earned by following an "older" track (3 to 5 hours) that is 800 to 1,000 yards long and has five (5) to seven (7) directional changes with the additional challenge of human cross tracks. The dog must find all four (4) "lost" articles. The TDX track presents difficult challenges with varying terrain, conditions, and obstacles for the dog and handler team to negotiate.
- **Variable Surface Tracking (VST):** In the real world, dogs

track through urban settings as well as through fields, hills, and woods. A VST dog has demonstrated this ability by following a 3- to 5-hour-old, 600-800 yard track that may take him/her down a street, through a building and other areas devoid of vegetation such as asphalt, concrete, or hard packed dirt to find 3 or 4 "lost" articles.

- **Champion Tracker (CT):** A dog that has successfully completed all three Tracking titles earns this prestigious title.

**Teaching a Dog to Track** ► Tracking is a good sport for dogs of all ages, including puppies and veterans. Tracking is not a timed event; rather, it is done at the dog's pace. Dysplastic and otherwise compromised dogs can track as long as they don't limp and it is not too much for their physical condition. Tracking, from an exercise standpoint, is good in that it is a gradual conditioning process that builds muscle strength and endurance. And, it provides a natural outlet for normal canine behaviors.

To get started in Tracking, one needs some guidance and information. Working with a friend, a dog club, or an instructor is ideal. However, it can be done on your own with the help of a book and some determination. There is much to learn in the tracking world, and it begins to make sense after you have been active in it for several weeks, following a chart of planned tracks that advance in length and age of scent.

For the first outings, the only equipment necessary is a flat collar, 6-12 foot leash, treats, an article, and a couple of flagged stakes. A tracking harness is necessary when the tracks become longer than 40-50 yards or as soon as the dog is pulling strongly. The harness goes on right before the track is started and is removed when the article is found. A 30-40 foot tracking lead is necessary as training progresses.

Puppies can begin tracking by 3 months of age, keeping in mind their short attention spans and growing bodies. Two short, straight tracks 3 times a week before a mealtime will teach and motivate until you think your puppy is capable of a more structured schedule. Puppy could even "find" his dinner dish!

One way to start a puppy or dog in tracking is by dragging a bone or piece of meat along the "track" during the introduction phase. It really gets them to focus on scenting. You can drop this technique after a few times and rely only on the food drops. In early stages you might also rub the heels of your boots with the food treat.

Beginning stages include "double laying" for the first several sessions with the dog watching. The tracklayer walks out from the start stake the prescribed distance, drops the article with food treat and places a second stake, then turns and walks back along the track to the start; hence "double laying."

After a few outings of double laid, tracks become single

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laid and increasingly longer. The dog is not allowed to watch the track being laid. Food drops are used every 10-20 paces. Age is gradually increased. When the dog has tracked for 10-12 outings or 5-6 days per week for 2 weeks and is pulling along the track with his nose down, turns are introduced with the aid of flagged stakes. Again, this is done systematically. A day of rest is necessary for the dog whose handler is able to track 5-6 days per week.

As the weeks go by and the dog is gaining skill, the food drops are spaced further apart. The handler will need to learn to make a map when laying a track. Age is increased, and tracks are becoming more complex by the end of 6 weeks of 5-6 days per week. If one has been diligent and persistent in training outings, he/she will have a dog that has the know-how to follow a track and will be getting close to being ready for certification with a little more practice.

Whether a person can go out tracking six days a week or one day per week, the dog will learn to follow scent. The dog that is able to go out more times per week will reach the goal in a shorter time frame.

Certification is a requirement in order to enter an AKC tracking test. For certification, the dog must successfully run a regulation track with a judge present.

**What Happens At An AKC Tracking Test** ► At an appointed time, the exhibitors draw for tracks in the presence of one or both judges. The draw determines the track order. Meanwhile, tracklayers are "laying" the tracks. On the judge's order, the handler and dog approach the starting flag. Most handlers usually put the tracking harness and line on the dog a short distance before this starting flag. The handler indicates the start to the dog, and then commands the dog to begin tracking. Usually the command is "Find It" or "Go Find."

For the TD track there is a second flag 30 yards along the track. As the dog searches for the track direction, the handler remains behind the start flag so as not to foul the track at this point in case the dog needs to be restarted. As the dog begins to pick up the track scent, his head goes down and he pulls into the harness. Off they go! When they pass the 30-yard stake, the two judges begin to follow the team a distance behind.

The dog must sort through a variety of scents and distractions to focus on the human scent trail he is following. When the dog reaches a turn, his head often comes up, and he may need to search for the new direction. When he locates the new direction, his head will go down as he scents along the new leg. Wind and weather influence track conditions, as do change of cover.



The handler follows behind his dog, holding the lead behind the marked 20-foot position. The line is up to 40 feet in length to allow the dog to search for the track if necessary. If the dog indicates loss of track, the handler stands still, especially if

he knows he is on the track. This allows the dog to search in the correct area. The handler can back up if necessary, using slack line. It is important that the handler know where the track leg is behind him for such situations.

It is a very happy and emotional moment when the dog finds the article at the end of the track. The sport of Tracking is a joy for dog, owner, judges, tracklayers, and all the people involved in putting on the test. There is nothing quite like it.

**Tracking Books and Videos** ► The following books and videos will get you started in tracking. Check amazon.com as well as various dog catalogs or bookstores for availability.

- **Tracking Regulations** (American Kennel Club). Read and know the rules.
- **Tracking From the Ground Up** (Show-Me Publications) by Sandy Ganz and Susan Boyd. An easy-to-use resource that is perfect for the beginning tracker and good with Berners. My favorite! Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Tracking Fundamentals** (video) with Sandy Ganz. A wonderful tool to help beginners. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Tracking Dog: Theory and Methods** (Arner Publications) by Glen R. Johnson. This is a classic and the "bible" of restrictive tracking. This book is more technical than Ganz & Boyd, but highly recommended. The Johnson program needs to be diluted for Berners. Together, these two books provide all the information you need for success. Available from Direct Book Service or [www.dogwise.com](http://www.dogwise.com)
- **Practical Tracking for Practically Everyone** by Julie Hogan and Donna Thompson. Another good how-to manual from authors with a combined total of 70 tracking titles. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Enthusiastic Tracking, The Step-by-step Training Manual** by William R. Sanders. Presents a structured and thorough motivational training method that prepares the dog and handler for the TD & TDX tests. The author helped train the first TDX Berner (1985), Viva's Graemlicker Bischof, owned by Carolyn Gramlich. Available from Direct Book Service or [www.dogwise.com/SP\\_Tracking.htm](http://www.dogwise.com/SP_Tracking.htm).
- **Component Training for Variable Surface Tracking** by Ed Presnall and Christy Bergeon. The only book on VST written by authors with three VST titles between them. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **It Only Takes a Scent** by Spencer. A practical, fun approach to teaching tracking. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Keeping Track: A Record of Your Dog's Progress in the Tracking Field** (Mueller Publications). This nifty package includes blank maps, mobile mapmaker and Pocket Tracker. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Scent and the Scenting Dog** (Arner Publications) by William G. Syrotuck. A very technical manual about the dynamics of scent and how dogs perform this amazing feat. Read this after you're completely hooked on the sport. Available from Direct Book Service.
- **Puppy Tracking Primer** by Carolyn Krause. Puppies can start tracking before they're old enough to do much else, and the relaxed atmosphere and no-stress exercise is perfect for developing minds and bodies.  
[www.dogwise.com/SP\\_Tracking.htm](http://www.dogwise.com/SP_Tracking.htm)