

## ~ The Sport of Tracking ~

The olfactory supremacy of dogs over humans has been well researched and documented, and their intelligence and problem solving skills never cease to amaze us. Dogs continually prove their worth in jobs such as bomb and drug detection, finding truffles, searching for survivors amongst rubble following natural disasters, and they are even now being used for Fire Ant detection here in Queensland! So it's no wonder they are key members of Search and Rescue teams, working in the front line to help save lives.

Tracking is based upon the concept of Search and Rescue. The dogs are required to find "lost" people in a variety of environments and weather conditions, over varying distances of up to 1.2km. Like other ANKC sports, dogs earn titles as they progress through the seven test levels, which become more difficult the higher the dog gets.

All tracks require a "lost" person, called the Tracklayer, a Steward to oversee the track, and a Judge. These latter two will walk behind the dog and handler during their test. Depending on the number of entries for a trial, tests may be conducted over one, two or more days. On the day prior to judging, the Steward and Judge will determine where the tracks will be set, which direction they will take, where corners (changes of direction) will be placed, and where the Tracklayer will hide at the end of the track. They will walk the track line, marking it with flags as they go, and map the track line for reference during the Test, to determine whether the dog is correct or not.



Photo – T. Collins with Zigrid, courtesy of A. & P. Le Riche-Perree.

On trial day, Tracklayers leave to walk their tracks around first light. The Tracklayer will follow the line of flags, leaving only the first in place and removing the rest. They leave a piece of cloth or clothing containing their scent at this "start flag" so that the dog knows who it has to find. There is a time delay between the Tracklayer setting off from this start flag, and the dog actually working the track, from 20 minutes for a beginner dog, up to 3 hours. With the start flag being the only point of reference for the handler, the dog takes charge, following the scent line left by the Tracklayer, negotiating the changes of direction correctly, ignoring superfluous scents while finding other items dropped by the Tracklayer, and eventually finding the Tracklayer themselves. On the higher level tracks, additional people referred to as Diversion or Cross-Track layers, will set other tracks across the top of the primary to test the dog's resolve in remaining focussed on the original track line.

### ***Tracking dogs earn the following titles:***

TD – Tracking Dog. This is for successful completion of Tests 1 to 3.

TDX – Tracking Dog Excellent, for successful completion of Tests 4 to 6.

TCh – Tracking Champion, for successful completion of the Test 7.

There are no placings in Tracking. Dogs will earn a passing grade of Pass, Good, Very Good, Excellent, or a Fail.

*Dogs with their TCh Title can now compete in the new sport of **Track & Search**, introduced in 2009, which builds on the tracks above, but which favours urban environments and even night time tracking.*

***What scent is the dog following?*** As people go about their daily business, they naturally shed skin cells, hair follicles, clothing fibres, perspiration, perfumes etc. All of this makes up an individual's scent signature, and it's said that no two people smell exactly the same. Dogs, once they take scent from the start article, are then required to accurately follow this scent line to the tracklayer at the track's end.

This doesn't sound like much of a challenge. However, weather conditions, sunlight, rain, heat and cold can all alter scent and its properties. Heat can evaporate scent and rain can wash it away, although dogs may pick up moments of it under stones and around grass roots. Fog tends to absorb scent particles, only to release them as the fog lifts, spreading them on the breeze far and wide. Wind can disperse scent across large areas, maybe 30m or more from the track line, and so the dog may work parallel to, but some distance from the Tracklayer's original footsteps, making the job of the Judge that much harder as he/she has to determine whether the dog is on-track, or whether it's succumbed to some other smell. Or the dog may decide to take the Diversion tracks. Then there are the natural distractions like cattle grazing over the scent line, or landforms such as gullies which may channel scent away from the track. Sometimes dogs will accidentally flush quail, hares, kangaroos or even ducks and this can create all kinds of problems for handlers, and great excitement for dogs!



Annette Dobson working TCh. Vizslajoy Brilliant Luke CDX

### ***How do we teach dogs to track?***

Tracking training does not include teaching the dogs how to track. Dogs are born with this natural ability. However, the training does involve teaching them to follow only the scent from the Start Article, ignoring all others, including those of wildlife and livestock. It also involves teaching the dog to give a positive

indication of articles found, in order to earn a passing grade. Training involves lots of practice, in all sorts of weather and in different locations, over different time frames to build the dog's confidence so that it can work out the puzzles of the track by itself (remembering that the handler has no idea which way the track goes, and has to defer to the dog in competition). The handler has to learn how to read the dog's signals and body language to know when it is on or off track, and then help when help is needed, but to otherwise just let the dog do its job. Dogs work in a harness and 10 metre lead, but the handler does not guide the dog. The dog has to be the leader. Learning how to handle this lead without causing interference and thereby pulling the dog off track can be a challenge in itself.

***Who can participate?*** Most breeds of dogs are suited to tracking, even the little guys like Mini Dachshunds. But remember that paddocks are rough - no mown lawns here. The people most suited to tracking are those who love spending time with their dogs in the great outdoors.

***How do I get started?*** Contact your local Club and/or visit a trial. This is not a sport that easily lends itself to evening classes under floodlights, because tracks are too large. So training is generally arranged for early mornings between small groups of trackers.

### ***Club Contacts for Information on Tracking:***

**All Breeds Tracking Club** - Margaret Hobbs Ph. 5580 5044 email: [prefect.agencies@rslcom.net.au](mailto:prefect.agencies@rslcom.net.au)

**Evergreen Tracking Club** - Debby Lamprecht Ph. 3886 6452 email: [gsptracker@skymesh.com.au](mailto:gsptracker@skymesh.com.au)

**Gympie Dog Obedience Club** – Mary Bickerton Ph. 3289 7996 email: [mareale@optusnet.com.au](mailto:mareale@optusnet.com.au)

**Caboolture Sports Dog Obedience Club**–Des Strong Ph. 3888 7599 email: [borderstrong@dodo.com.au](mailto:borderstrong@dodo.com.au)

**Rockhampton Dog Obedience Club** – Megan Grieve Ph. 4921 2160 email: [meg-73@hotmail.com](mailto:meg-73@hotmail.com)

***So, do us a favour...“Get Lost!”***