

Early Training

By John Jeanneney

If you have the opportunity, start training your puppy at a young age. Very early training, say at seven weeks, will not transform the puppy into a great tracker right away, but it will lay the groundwork for a real tracking dog in the future.

Early training is really psychological conditioning even more than it is a teaching of practical skills. Scientific research has shown that when a young mammal brain is still developing the efficiency of the “wiring” (neuron circuitry) is enhanced in the parts of the brain being stimulated. Turn on your puppy with fun drags of a deer liver for perhaps 20 feet. Let him sink his little teeth into that good stuff, the raw liver that he has tracked and found at the end of the scent line.

From liver drags you can move on to a dripped line of deer blood with a goody at the end. Deer liver never loses its appeal, but you can also add a scrap of thawed-out deer hide, or a deer tail on a string. After the pup’s find, make that deer tail frisk about just ahead of him. You are pumping up his prey drive to sustain him well on those long difficult tracks in the future.

Pups vary in their speed of learning, and the fastest learners are not always the best in the long run. You should aim to amuse and challenge the pup, keeping just within the limits of his capacity of the moment. Play it by ear and keep it fun.

A right angle turn of the scent line creates a problem to be solved. The pup hits the turn and overshoots. Where is it? Where did that good scent go? He checks back to where he last smelled it. He swings around this point, and takes the line in the new direction. He has picked his first check!

The pup’s first scent line should be very fresh, but you will notice that pup will stop on the line to lick liver scent and particularly the wet deer blood. He may forget about following the line in the right direction; he focuses on just one point and bogs down. This is when you must begin understanding the world of scent as it is perceived by the dog.

Even a puppy’s nose far surpasses anything we can imagine. At this stage his nose is much more mature than the brain that tries to process the scent information. You will actually make it easier for the pup to learn if you make the line older—two hours, four hours, even more. Now the blood is dry, but still giving off scent particles along the line of the track. Now the pup can work a more definite line with his nose; he can do cleaner, more efficient work because he is not wandering around in a big tunnel of scent created by fresh, wet blood.

A blood line ages much more slowly than a man track or a coon track. The man scent blows away or burns off in the sun. In contrast, a drop of blood stays in one spot and gives off scent particles for days. You should not be surprised to see four-month-old puppies following a 10 hour blood line with ease.

Something needs to be said about laying the line. Drags of a piece of deer liver (or heart) will be replaced by trails laid with blood. Don't resort to drags made with a fresh deer hide. The hide leaves too much scent, and allows the puppy to be loose and sloppy as he follows the trail.

Blood can be applied either with a squeeze bottle or with a two inch square of sponge held on the end of a stick with a screw and a washer. A little blood goes a long way. A quarter pint is plenty for a two hundred yard track. Gather the blood in Zip-lok bags from the chest cavities of deer shot or killed on the highway. Then freeze it in small quantities such as individual margarine containers. Deer blood best stimulates the prey drive of dogs, but cattle blood will work. Generally Labs, versatile pointing dogs and curs respond better to cattle blood than do dachshunds and other hounds.

As early training for tracking is progressing, the puppy should also be learning to walk calmly at the side of his handler on a short leash. Once he stops fighting the short leash, it is time to start working him on a light tracking leash about 20 feet long. For pups under 15 pounds, plastic clothes line is excellent. It is very light and it offers little friction. With it, you can gently steer your puppy, if needed, and keep him focused. For larger pups a length of well broken-in cotton or polypropylene clothes line will do.

Even for dogs that will work off lead in the South and in Texas, it is a good idea to use a tracking leash in early training. It gives you much more control.

There is always a temptation to keep laying training lines on the same lawn. Dogs, including puppies, have a good memory for where they have found things in the past. Their noses can also inform them of the whereabouts of earlier blood lines. After a pup is 12 weeks old and working lines more than a hundred yards long, it is worth the trouble to conduct each training session in a different woodlot or field.

For puppies with the right instincts, training for tracking should be approached as a channeling of natural desire, not as an obedience exercise. You want to develop the pup's initiative to solve tracking problems for himself. This is what he will have to do in the future when he tracks the real thing and his handler cannot tell him where the deer went. Therefore do not push the pup farther than his natural desire and inquisitiveness will take him on his own.

Some pups will show signs of boredom if similar training exercises are repeated every day. Play it by ear, and with a feel for the weather. Usually little will be learned on hot, humid days. In most seasons a session every three days will be enough. As a puppy grows into more challenging lines, a 500 yard line once a week may be the best.