

ACQUIRING A TRACKING DOG

By John Jeanneney

The conditions under which tracking dogs find wounded game vary greatly across the United States. First you must consider whether your state requires you to work your dog on a tracking leash or allows you to work your dog off lead. In the northern part of the country, where all use of dogs in deer hunting was prohibited about century ago, the laws and regulations permitting the use of dogs to find wounded deer always specify that the dog must be controlled on a leash. In contrast, through much of the South and in Texas, leash laws were never established; in these states the handler has the option of working his tracking dog off lead.

If you believe that you will be working your dog off lead, then there is definitely an advantage in choosing a pup that will grow into a large powerful dog. A big Lab, or cow and hog dogs like the Catahoulla and blackmouth curs will be able to bay or even pull down a mortally wounded deer, thus saving many miles of travel for the handler though thick brush or swamps.

In the *leashed* tracking dog states, there is no inherent advantage in having great size and power in your tracking dog; size may actually be a disadvantage for tracking in heavy cover. Few relish the idea of having an eager powerhouse towing them through briar thickets or over barbed wire fences. For example, a 90 pound blood hound on a leash can be a nightmare unless well-trained to slow down to his handler's rate of speed.

A negative for the small dog of beagle or dachshund size is the poisonous snake factor. A small dog, struck in the shoulder, neck or head, will usually die. A larger, higher stationed dog will usually be bitten on a leg, and this is seldom fatal. I would not recommend a small dog in situations where venomous snakes are likely to be encountered while tracking.

Many handlers, who realize the importance of a close relationship with their tracking dog, may actually find that a smaller dog adjusts better to living as part of a family household.

The qualities of nose vary among breeds and among individuals within a breed. What kind of nose do you need? There are dogs, such as the Catahoulla and black mouth curs that excel at air scenting but are weaker at working out old, cold ground scent. Such dogs will wind scent many downed deer in a breezy state like Texas, but are likely to have trouble working a scent trail on the ground if it is over four hours old. But if you are a member of a hunting club or lease, a dog with four-hour scent line capabilities, under average conditions, may be totally adequate. The gut shot deer, which require waiting longer than four hours, are usually easy to track anyway.

At the other end of the scenting spectrum are the scent hound breeds, and especially the bloodhound. If you are a professional tracker, who specializes in finding trophy bucks, wounded and lost days earlier, then the bloodhound is the dog of choice. For most handlers, the bloodhound will have more scenting power than is needed. For them it would be like hunting quail with a ten gauge shotgun. The difficulties of handling and maintaining a large, short-lived dog, such as a bloodhound may outweigh the very real advantages of a super nose.

Your dog does not have to be a narrow, one task specialist. It is best to select a type of dog that will fit into your broader hunting and recreational activities during the rest of the year. For example if you are an avid bird hunter, consider getting a Lab, or one of the versatile pointing breeds. A hunting dachshund with voice can be exercised through rabbit hunting or simply running rabbits for the fun of it. The time spent in the field in hunting will translate into better cooperation and better conditioning for tracking. An intelligent dog, which is the only sort you should work with, can learn what game is the focus of the day. Physically and psychologically he will fare better if he is active throughout the year.

You should be aware that in the United States many different breeds, and mixed breeds, are successfully used for tracking. If you are already involved with a particular breed, try a promising individual from blood lines you are familiar with. If you aren't yet sure of what you want, consider a candidate from one of the following, widely used breeds: Bavarian Mountain Bloodhound, German hunting dachshund, Labrador retriever.

This is a brief overview of the factors to be considered when selecting a breed of tracking dog. For a more detailed and complete discussion of the many tracking dog breeds consult John Jeanneney's *Tracking Dogs for Finding Wounded Deer.*)

Show, Pet and Hunting Breeding

Breed generalizations are useful only up to a point. In most "working" or "hunting" breeds three different physical and psychological types exist: **show, pet or companion,** and **hunting or working.** In some breeds, the setters for example, there has been a very sharp division into show and hunting types, and you should be aware of this.

Generalizations about show, pet and hunting dogs are useful, even though there may be, in reality, some overlap between these types.

Most show breeders are interested in producing show champions including some champions that will go on to win in championship competition. Because of the complexities and competitiveness of the dog show game, they can seldom give hunting or tracking abilities a high priority. These show people are not necessarily against hunting or tracking, but they ignore working ability in selecting breeding animals.

Pet or companion dogs come from several sources. Many pets come from show breeders who recognize that certain pups will not make the grade in the show ring. Many hunter/breeders sometimes do the same thing when they realize that certain puppies “don’t have it.” There are also “pet breeders”, who produce puppies with no intention of either showing them or developing them as workers or hunters. Some of them breed out of an honest desire to provide sound, stable and attractive companions for people. Even though these breeders are not interested in working their dogs at the traditional tasks of the breed, they find that many of the original breed traits enhance the quality of a dog as a companion.

It does happen that there are some dogs, products of pet breeding, which have all the necessary desire, capability and common sense. This is particularly true in blood tracking. Here intelligence, coupled with a reasonable amount of nose, is the single most important trait that we needed. You have the best chance of getting a useful dog if you purchase from a knowledgeable breeder, who breeds physically sound dogs that are intelligent and nose-oriented.

As a general rule you should be cautious about buying a pup out of show or pet breeding; this does not imply that the dogs bred by hunters are always good. All too often the hunter/breeder is a guy who likes his dog, and thinks about having a “chip off the old block” to replace him when he passes on. His buddy, who lives in the next town, has a hunting bitch of the same breed, so they put them together at the amorous moment. The two prospective parents may be very ordinary dogs, or they may have similar physical or psychological weaknesses; no thought is given to this. It is a one-litter affair, bred for sentimental reasons, and no particular effort is made to follow up on the pups to see how they work out. A hunter/breeder like this, who has seen few dogs work except his own, does not learn much more by selling a few pups that disappear at seven weeks into the great unknown. The casual hunter/breeder may have the best intentions of producing fine hunting dogs, but his hit-or-miss methods are not very likely to produce them.

There are also hunter/breeders with much more experience. They understand their blood lines, and they have produced enough litters to know which matings produce a high percentage of intelligent, trainable puppies. They work with their young puppies, and they keep informed about them after they are sold. Their own hunting and tracking work in the field gives them a thorough understanding of what a young puppy must be to succeed.

Nature and Nurture

Many of the behavioral characteristics of dogs are inherited genetically from their ancestors; You should ask about what the parents have done in the woods and fields, and

you should verify the breeder's explanations by all means possible. Avoid cranked up, hyper dogs that may have excelled in field trials through expert handling. For example, in Labs look for the intelligent calm dog that will wait patiently for hours in a duck blind. You are not looking for a Lab .to impress field trial judges with flash, splash or robot-like obedience that was imposed by harsh use of electronic collars. Likewise in coonhounds you want a responsive" pleasure hound" rather than a hard-driving competition hound that ranges off into the distance and just keeps running until he trees.

Pay attention to a dog's family background, but recognize that nurture, the environment in which the dog is raised, is tremendously important too. A puppy that has spent the first four months of his life in a kennel, with little human contact and little stimulation to track, is a poor prospect. The circuitry of a dog's brain develops rapidly in the early months. The long term *potential* for tracking and a close relationship with the handler is enhanced if the puppy gets lots of attention and outings from the kennel at an early age.

One school of thought advocates purchasing puppies at the age of seven weeks when the will most readily adapt to their new owner. The problem with this is that it is very difficult to evaluate a pup at seven weeks. Important traits, like tracking desire and line sense (the recognition that ground scent leads from "A" to "B") begin to show from seven to twelve weeks of age . That is when observing the puppy on a bloodline or liver drag will be much more useful.

Buying a Trained Dog

For many busy people the idea of buying a trained dog is attractive. The problem is that truly trained dogs are very difficult to find. In the current market the demand for tracking dogs is strong, and any offering is snapped up almost immediately. There are also deeper, longer-term reasons why buying a trained tracking dog is difficult, much more difficult than buying a finished coonhound or an accomplished retriever for duck hunting.

First of all you can't train a dog up to the point where he is capable of handling old, cold lines with no visible blood unless he has acquired considerable live experience on real wounded deer. My own estimate is that a dog only develops to about 25% of his full potential by training on practice lines laid out with deer blood. To go much beyond this level requires an enormous amount of time, which most trainers do not have. Of course that same primary, 25% level of performance can also be reached by working the dog to find easy deer that could have been tracked by eye.

It can help considerably if the beginner dog is worked with an old veteran tracking dog; the young dog should be allowed to take the lead and work it when he can. There are many different ways to train a tracking dog, but none of them can completely replace the experience that a young dog gains when he works to find a difficult deer on his own. This is what develops the confidence and initiative we should expect in a completely trained

dog. And it is difficult to give enough solo, live-tracking experiences to even one young dog. It becomes impossible to give this sort of experience to several dogs being trained for sale by a professional.

When a call comes in from a hunter to find his wounded deer, the first priority is to find that deer, not to conduct a training session. The handler feels compelled to go out with the “Varsity”, an experienced dog that maximizes the chances of success. Sometimes a “JV” dog can be used in the search if there is a second handler, or if the tracking takes place fairly close to where the truck is parked. Then it is possible to go back for the more experienced dog if needed. Still, the important point is that it’s not so easy to give a young tracking dog the natural experience that would normally be provided for a duck retriever or a pointing dog. When a veteran and an inexperienced dog can be worked off lead together, as in Texas, things are simpler, and it is easier to develop young tracking dogs.

This leads us to a second point. The new owner or handler of a young tracking dog should have a relationship with that dog. The handler has to read the dog; usually it helps a lot if the dog also knows and can read the handler. Every dog has his own body language; if the handler has done some training with that dog, he will be able to recognize when his young tracker gets excited over some hot line of unwanted game.

Some dogs are very easy to read in this respect; the head will come up, tail rhythm will accelerate and they may even yip in excitement. Others are very difficult to read. Certainly it’s not a matter of “If you know one dog, you know ‘em all”.

On another level, the pack/partnership relationship, which underlies all dog social behavior, has to be established before dog and handler are going to work well together. If the dog does not know and respect the handler as the leader of his pack, then the dog is not likely to work as hard when the going gets tough.

There are dog jockeys who will tell a prospective buyer anything to get a sale. They will take advantage of the man who wants “a fully trained dog”, something that he can use right away like a brand new shotgun. But money alone will not suffice to acquire a “fully trained tracking dog” unless time and personal attention are also invested.

There is at least one more reason why “fully trained dogs” are hard to come by. If a handler works closely with a good dog through many tracking adventures, he finds a bond developing, even though he did not intend to have this happen. On a dark cold night both handler and dog understand that they are a team working together. They both sense that in working together, they will accomplish something that neither would be able to achieve alone. This bonding sinks in gradually over time. Then too the handler becomes aware that his own reputation is tied up with the good dog he works with.

There’s a saying in Germany that the opportunity to buy a really good tracking dog comes only when the owner/handler dies or becomes too old and sick to continue in the woods. Right now this certainly applies in North America too.