

# Anatomy of the Blood Tracking Addict

by John Jeanneney

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Passages from the forthcoming book,  
*Tracking Dogs for Finding Wounded Deer*, by John Jeanneney.

One thing that all dedicated handlers have in common is a fascination with the magic of tracking wounded deer with a good dog. It becomes an obsession, an addiction, and I share it. This blood tracking is not something that you get into in a "moderate" way. Either you love it or it doesn't appeal to you much at all. The ones who are lukewarm about it never amount to much, because they never find time enough to work with their dogs. If you have a lot of other priorities, and other people pushing those priorities, then training OLD BLOOD NOSE will always end up at the bottom of the list. He will languish in his kennel all year and then be out of shape and unfocused when the time comes to find a deer.

Over the years in Deer Search we have developed a "profile" of the promising handler prospect. There are some exceptions, but generally it holds true.

The best handlers, the addicts, turn out to have been involved with dogs from youth. A lot of them were boyhood coon hunters. These people are comfortable working after dark and that is a big plus in deer finding work.

If any adult approaches me about getting a tracking dog, and he or she has never had a dog, then I am suspicious in a friendly way. How could this person have stayed away from dogs for so long?

Most outstanding handlers are, or have been, dedicated deer hunters with the patience to wait on stand for many hours. They are fascinated by deer and they have a good sense of how deer act, wounded or unwounded. Finding the wounded deer has to be a very strong motivation, an overwhelming drive. It follows that a successful handler, like a successful dog, is a stubborn, I-hate-to-quit individual.

Gary Salisbury of Knox, New York, going into his second season, is one of the best natural dog handlers that I have seen. His introduction to tracking came when I spent a whole day unsuccessfully searching for his buddy's deer on a day when a roaring wind destroyed most ground scent. The deer, although mortally hit, did not bleed much and clearly left the area. A normal human being would have been bored and turned off by such an unproductive day, but the experience was all that was needed to get Gary started.

Another way to screen handler prospects is to get them out in a big alder swamp on a cold, rainy night. Even if you come up with the deer, the joys of snaking him out through all those wet alder branches leaning out at 45 degrees will give the handler-to-be something to think about. If he comes back for a second deer call, he will probably be a good one.

Watch out for the dog owner who calls up and says: "I have this nice Lab (or dachshund or shihtzu) and I want to have something for him to do." If a person is so focused dog on an individual dog that their interest begins and ends with that dog, then their motivation is not deep enough. If the dog happens to have talent, they may train him and take a few calls. If the dog has

no interest, they are gone forever. The dedicated handler is determined to have a dog that will do the job; if an individual dog or one breed fails, he turns to another. Sometimes this may mean finding a new home for the failed prospect. For some aspiring handlers and their families this is a tough decision to make.

In developing handlers in Deer Search we have found that many teenagers like to go along on a few calls; but few people are ready to get involved until they are in their mid-thirties. When young people are dating, few are willing to pay the price that comes with saying, "Honey, I know it's Saturday night, but I just got a deer call." Later, it's a heavy mortgage, two jobs, young kids and a wife who complains that you are never around.

If you look at the numbers, it is clear that more men than woman are drawn to tracking wounded deer. The women who do track seriously resist the pressures to be ladylike and make their own priorities. Lee Behrens of Bellmore, Barbara Schmidt in Sagaponack and Denise Sobolewski in Marcellus (all in New York State) are first rate and as tough as they have to be. They are all self-starters who do not need a husband to go along and tell them what to do.

Successful handlers take pride in what their tracking dogs can do. They know that an outstanding dog gets that way partly because of natural talent, but even more by going out on a lot of deer calls. They know that a dog tracking one or two wounded deer a season will never develop to his full potential, even though he has received good basic training in the beginning.

Dedicated handlers with great dogs take all the good deer calls that their job and family obligations permit. When they hunt in the daytime they track at night. They don't get a whole lot of sleep.