

TRAINING TIPS.....Laying Trails

By Jan Frazee



Like many of us in CARDA, I work a trailing dog, a scent-specific dog that follows the scent path of a subject and is also sensitive to fresh air scent from the subject and residual scent of the subject's possible other visits to an area. When I started, I received a lot of help from people, primarily CARDA members. I gleaned ideas from these generous handlers, and from the few written resources I could find. Any good ideas I have are theirs!

When I think about laying trails for trailing dogs, I think about them in three different situations: the beginning dog, the intermediate/advanced dog, and tests.

My favorite way to start a puppy or dog at the moment is to use brush or vegetation that's between knee-high and shoulder-high. I like to use trails and/or openings in the vegetation. I start with short run-aways. The dog wears a harness and a line is attached. The subject at first is the handler. The handler entices the dog to follow him/her with sweet talk and treats or toys. The handler walks or runs twenty feet or so straight away from the dog into the brush. The assistant offers a scent article, then encourages the dog to follow the handler. When dog and handler are together, much praise and rewarding takes place. Very soon (let the dog's maturity, enthusiasm, and success be your guide), move on to using another subject. Within a couple of sessions, add a split or "t" to the very short trails. The dog will in most cases instinctively use its nose to locate the subject. Slowly add length. Work about three tiny trails at each session. Quit well before the dog tires of the game. Change one factor at a time when transitioning to intermediate/advanced problems.

The intermediate/advanced dog needs variety. Move into other kinds of terrain and vegetation. Alter the length of the trail, so that the dog never knows how long it will go before finding the subject. Work across grass, parking lots, and cow pastures. Trail in rain, in snow, in fog, and in heat. Work your dog around rabbits and deer, through forests and over rocks. Make abrupt turns off established trails into brush or weeds. Accustom your dog to working near traffic, to having to wait until it's safe to move on. Use subjects that are lying down, sitting, walking, and standing in a spread-out group. Set trails along streams. Have the subject cross his/her own trail. Have the subject do that with a gap of several days. Your job as a handler is to observe. The dog is showing you where the scent is (or isn't). Be careful that you don't encourage the dog to leave scent and wander on to try to find it again. This can happen if the trail is too difficult. The dog either quits and becomes discouraged, or it learns to continue on and hope to run onto some scent somewhere, or to depend on you to know where it should go. Run some trails (perhaps one tenth to one twentieth of the total) blind, with a trusted and knowledgeable person with you who knows where the subject walked. One authority suggested that if you've run about 90 trails, you've probably come somewhere near being prepared to work this dog on searches. You may be ready for a Mission Ready test.

The parameters for a Mission Ready test trail are listed in the CARDA Standards. Some additional things that I keep in mind when setting a test trail are choices, change of surface, contours, and contamination. By choices, I mean that as I am providing at least several opportunities for the dog to either leave an established trail, choose a fork, or make a turn, I want a wrong choice by the dog to take it ever farther from the subject. Change of surface is necessary to ensure that the dog is able to work not only dirt trails but also grass or weeds, brushy areas, etc. The term contour reminds me to look for some change in elevation. The team should work up a hill and/or down one. This can give an indication of the handler's knowledge of scent behavior. I like test trails to have been contaminated by critters, people, and/or other dogs. This is pretty easy to achieve in most areas of our state. I don't like the trail to be contaminated with residual scent of the subject (trained here two weeks ago) so this becomes an issue on the test.

As an evaluator, I like to "test the test" ahead of time, asking a friend to run the trail blind so that I can see what the problems might be. There are some trails that are great for training, but could cause an unnecessary fail on a test. So far, the places I've seen this become a problem involved running water (stream or creek). The scent (and the team) can sometimes travel so far downstream that the team never is able to get back to the scent path. Some tests have crossed water without this being a problem. If I've "tested the test," with a handler with a