

Article Indications

By Rosemary Janoch

Many handlers start training their young dogs to track by walking away from the dog and dropping a favorite toy ten or twenty yards away. Often the toy is tossed up in the air a few times to insure the dog knows the handler has it out in the field. After returning to the dog, the handler can now ask “Where’s your toy?” or “Find your toy!” and a dog that is highly motivated to find the object will begin tracking the handler’s footprints to find the toy.

Using a highly motivational article to get a dog to track is one of the most common methods used to track dogs. There comes a time for most dogs, however, when the track itself becomes self-motivating. There comes a time when following the track is so very interesting, and so much fun, that the dog doesn’t want to be bothered stopping at articles. He wants to keep on tracking.

Have you ever watched a dog find the glove and then continue following the track layer’s route right out of the field? I have even seen young puppies exhibit this behavior after only a few tracking lessons.

This keen interest in following the track is a highly desirable behavior in a tracking dog. It is also a behavior that can result in failing a test if the dog is so intrigued with following the track that he fails to indicate an article to the handler. Thus, from the very beginning, a handler must train a consistent, reliable article indication.

AKC tracking regulations state that the dog must indicate the article at the end of the track, but the regulations don’t specify how the indication is to be given. It is up to the handler and the dog to mutually decide what works best for them.

The most common article indications are the retrieve and the down. There are many other indications, however. Some dogs sit at an article. Some dogs pick up the article but do not retrieve it to hand. Still other dogs stand and stare at the article while others stand and look back at the handler. While all of these are good indications, there are also less desirable indications, like the dog that merely glances at an article and then moves on. That type of dog better have an *extremely* observant and alert handler.

Although any indication that is consistent (which means the behavior is exactly the same every time) and reliable (which means the dog will unfailing do it every time) and with which the handler is comfortable is a good indication, I will discuss only the two most common ones, the retrieve and the down.

If your dog is a natural retriever, then all you need to do is encourage the dog to pick up the article (see photo 1). Do not be too eager to take the dog’s prize away. Definitely don’t grab for it. Let the dog enjoy his reward. Play tug with it, or toss it a few feet away so he can retrieve it again. If he wants to, let him carry it all the way back to the car. Always be sure to praise the retrieve, and make a fuss over how clever your dog is to find an article.



Photo 1:
Be sure to reinforce each and every retrieve with lots of praise.

If your dog shows an interest in the glove but isn’t sure if he wants to pick it up, wiggle it in the grass at his feet, or zigzag it through the grass away from the dog like it is an animal trying to get away from him. Hopefully, your dog will pounce on the glove, grab it, and try to shake it to death.

If these maneuvers in the field don’t work, take the retrieve training out of the tracking field. Use clicker training, or another inductive method, to get a retrieve. While doing this training, don’t limit the retrieve to a glove. Repeat the training with a sock, a handkerchief, a knitted hat, a baseball cap, a scarf, an eyeglass case, and other various articles until you are confident your dog will pick up any conceivable object that might be encountered on a track (see photo 2).



Photo 2:
Be sure to vary the size, shape, color, and texture of your articles.

Don't limit the retrieve training to your living room. Be sure to do the training in your yard as well as in all the rooms in the house. Train in your neighbor's yard. Do it at your training building. Train the retrieve at an agility trial where you spend all day waiting for your 40 second run. Put those extra hours to good use! The more varied the locations are in which you train the retrieve, the more likely your dog will retrieve an article anytime and anywhere.

If your dog is a definite non-retriever, however, or if you plan on doing VST training where many of the articles are metal or hard plastic and are so flat that retrieving them is difficult for the dog, you might want to consider teaching your dog to drop as an article indication. Although it is not necessary, many handlers will specifically teach their dog to drop with the article between the dog's front legs (see photo 3).



Photo 3:
If you are teaching the down, be sure your dog will drop reliably on all types of surfaces in the immediate vicinity of the article.

I taught a drop indication with one of my puppies by placing an entire Beggin' Strip inside the glove leaving about an inch of the treat sticking out of the glove. The puppy just naturally downed at the glove as he pulled the treat out and ate it. Since the treat was quite big and he was quite small, he would spend several minutes on the ground next to the glove happily munching on his reward. Even as he grew and could eat the treat much faster, I continued to encourage him into the down position by putting mild pressure on his withers. I would praise him while he was in this position and gently stroke his back to keep him down while he was eating. Just this small effort on my part resulted in an adult dog that consistently and reliably dropped at articles all the way through his TDX title.

If you are going to teach your dog to drop at articles, you must train the behavior in the same manner that you would train the retrieve. You must vary the training locations. You must also vary the articles you use. Your dog must be willing to drop at a metal switch plate, a plastic lid, a crushed can, a plastic comb, a denim pocket ripped off a pair of jeans, a toothbrush and, of course, a glove.

If you decide to teach the down, use lots of positive reinforcement. Offer your dog a tasty treat for finding an article while he is still in the down position. A drink of water can also be used for many dogs as a reward. When your dog drops at an article, you should both pet and praise. Roughhouse with him if that's what turns him on. Individualize the reward to suit the dog. Don't give your dog a piece of hot dog if he prefers cheese. Don't throw a tennis ball for him if he prefers a Frisbee.

Keep in mind that if you harshly command "Down!" or, even worse, *push* him into a down each time your dog finds an article, you should expect your dog to view the discovery of an article as an unpleasant experience. It will not be long before your dog either gives up tracking for you all together, or begins to "blink" the articles. He will track right past articles and act like he doesn't see them. Keeping your drop training upbeat and positive prevents problems like blinking.

You can encourage interest in a relatively boring article like a brown glove by pairing it with an object that is highly motivational to the dog, like a soft Frisbee. If your dog is not crazy about a Frisbee, substitute a tennis ball, a squeaky toy, or any other highly desirable object, including food, for the Frisbee in the following explanation.

Start this training by walking a short track, letting your dog know you have his Frisbee. Turn to face your dog and toss the Frisbee in the air once or twice to increase the dog's interest before dropping it on the ground. Return to your dog and let him run the track. Be sure to engage him in excited play with the Frisbee when he finds it.

When your dog will eagerly do this, it is time to pair this highly desirable object with a neutral object like the glove. This next step involves folding the soft Frisbee and placing it inside the glove. Walk a track as before letting your dog see his Frisbee tossed in the air. Instead of dropping the Frisbee on the ground, however, fold it and tuck it into the glove. Run the track with your dog. When he finds the glove, enthusiastically praise him, pull out the Frisbee, and play with him as you did before.

After your dog is comfortable tracking to the glove and waiting for you to pull out the Frisbee, move on to the next step. Put the glove on the track and put the Frisbee in your back pocket. When your dog finds the glove without the Frisbee, again praise him enthusiastically, pull the Frisbee out of your back pocket and play with him as before. The glove will now become a desirable object, too. It signals that playtime with the handler is about to start. I would encourage you to go one additional step and start playing tug with the glove and tossing the glove rather than the Frisbee, so that the glove becomes the primary reinforcement for tracking, and the Frisbee is no longer needed.

Pairing a desirable object with a neutral object can also be used to increase a dog's interest in wallets, shoes, ties, belts, etc. Remember not to shove the new object into the dog's face to get him to play with it. It is more effective to tease the dog with it by moving it away from the dog

while encouraging him to play. Toss it up in the air and catch it yourself, playing a game of keep-away with your dog. Giggle and squeal like you are having the time of your life. It won't be long before your dog joins in the fun.

As you and your dog become a stronger tracking team, you will no doubt become an expert at reading your dog's body language. You will become aware of body language that clearly indicates an article is nearby. Sometimes the dog's head comes up. Sometimes the head jerks quickly one way or the other as though he just caught sight of something. Sometimes a dog begins to frantically wag his tail. Whatever it is that your dog does when he knows an article is nearby, you must identify it and always respect his communication to you.

Consequently, do not push the dog forward by urging him to keep tracking if his body language tells you he is busy locating an article. Insist that your dog develop the perseverance needed to hunt for an article hidden in difficult cover. Occasionally place an article in a depression, behind a small growth of vegetation, or in some other awkward location so that the dog must work to find it. Know specifically where each of your articles are placed on the track and do not allow your dog to pass one without finding its exact location and indicating that article to you.

Train him to find articles that have been blown a short distance off the track by the wind, or have been carried a short distance away by an animal or person. Set up training tracks where you deliberately drop the articles a couple of feet to the right or left of the track. As your dog becomes proficient at this distance, begin to toss them farther from the actual track. Toss them upwind at first so that the breeze carries the scent of the article to your dog's nose. Graduate to tossing them downwind for the really experienced dog.

Although you will strive for consistency in your dog's article indications, keep in mind that some articles hold more scent than others. Your dog may need help in learning to indicate articles that have even the faintest of track layer scent on them. Be patient with these more challenging articles. The metal articles used on VST tracks, for instance, can be quite difficult for some dogs. Be patient in your training and be consistent in your expectations.

I would like to mention one final thing about article indications. This refers to the handlers, however, and not the dogs. At a tracking test, be sure to hold each and every article your dog finds high over your head and give it a little wave so that the judges know that the article has been picked up. If you ever find yourself walking over the top of an article at a test, by all means bend over, pick it up, and wave it like crazy. Your dog probably indicated it to you, but you missed it. Shame on you if you missed your dog's indication. If he *didn't* give you a clear, consistent, reliable indication, however, shame on you for not teaching him better! Either way, folks, we have only ourselves to blame.

Happy tracking to you all and may all your articles be in plain sight.