

Restarts

By Rosemary Janoch

With the new tracking regulations in effect, it is more important than ever to teach our tracking dogs to do a restart. Handlers often teach this only to those dogs that are going on to advanced tracking titles. In the new regulations, however, with all tracks having a start article at the first flag, waiting to teach a restart will no longer be an option. All tracking dogs, even beginners, must master the restart to be successful in AKC tracking tests.

There are many times a restart is needed, since a dog must restart each time he stops tracking. For instance, a dog stops tracking each time he indicates an article to his handler. Whether he sits, downs, or retrieves, he is no longer tracking. After the handler praises the dog for the article find, and puts the article away, the dog now needs to restart his track. Up to now, many dogs have been able to earn their TD titles without ever learning how to restart because there was no article at the start flag. By the time the dog found the glove, the track was over and no restart was necessary. Handlers who never taught their beginner dogs how to restart, however, were taking an unnecessary risk. I have seen far too many tests where a track layer dropped a tissue on the track or dropped the map or, heaven forbid, dropped an extra glove out of their pocket while laying the track. When a beginner dog indicates one of these “extra” articles on the track, the dog might well believe his job is done and quit working. A handler needs to be prepared at such a time with a well trained dog that clearly understands how to restart in order to finish that track successfully.

A restart is also needed to refocus the dog on the job at hand when a distraction has occurred. The distraction can come in many forms including critters, accidental cross tracks, honking geese flying overhead, loud noises, a talkative gallery, or judges following too closely behind the tracking team. Stopping to give your dog a water break, or stopping the dog to resent him with an article are also distractions. All of these distractions, and many more, require the dog to restart after losing his attention on the track.

Heavy vegetation will almost certainly necessitate a restart at some point. Tracking lines snag on brush and heavy cover, or get wrapped around trees (see photo 1) or tangled in the dog’s legs. The dog needs to wait until the handler can deal with the cover or the tracking line, and then needs to restart



Photo 1:

When checking whether a track goes into the woods, or turns just before the woods, it is easy for a dog to wrap the lead around a tree. Give your dog a “sit” or “wait” command, untangle the lead, and then give your restart command.

Safety issues also cause interruptions for the tracking dog. Road crossings (see photos 2-4), barb wire fences, sharp inclines/declines, stream crossings (especially with steep slippery banks), and fallen trees are just a few of the many circumstances that would necessitate a dog waiting on the track for the handler to negotiate a potentially dangerous situation. In such instances, it is wise for the handler to have both a “wait” command of some sort for the dog, and a restart command for when the situation has been dealt with safely.



Photo 2:

When your dog is tracking directly toward a well traveled road, use your “sit” or “wait” command to control the forward movement of the dog.



Photo 3:

Move up the lead until you are in close proximity to the dog.



Photo 4:
Check for safe crossing conditions before going
down a steep bank and across the road.

Teaching a restart generally entails using a specific word or phrase that will always mean that the dog should begin tracking. What word or phrase you use doesn't matter as long as you use the same one consistently. For instance, I use "Go find!" to tell my dog to track. My puppies are introduced to this command on the very first day of tracking. I stand at the starting flag and put on the puppy harness. As I clip the lead to the D-ring on the top of the harness, I tell the puppy to "Go find!". I repeat the same procedure over and over again at each tracking session. It is not long before my dog pulls forward into his harness and begins working the moment the lead is attached to the D-ring. He no longer needs the command, but I continue to say it anyway. Why? I do it because I want to have verbal control over my dog when I need to restart him in the field. I cannot call him to me, take off his harness, put it back on him, and hook up the line to the D-ring to let him know we are tracking again. I need to be able to restart him from where he is in the field.

Do what you can to make the restart after an article easy for your dog, just like you would for a new dog that is just learning to do turns. You can triple lay the track for ten yards or so right after an article to make the track easy for the dog to find. If you prefer, you can baby step the ten yards instead of triple laying it. If you train with food, you can place a food drop several yards down the track after an article to reward the dog for restarting after the article find.

The idea is to provide the dog with a motivation to continue the track after he has stopped. You can even use an *article* to reinforce the restart after finding an article! For instance, if you are teaching your dog to restart after indicating an eyeglass case that he does not find particularly interesting, follow the eyeglass case with his very favorite article or toy just 20 more yards down the track (see photos 5-6). He will soon learn to regard the uninteresting article as an especially good spot on the track to continue moving forward because he *knows* that his favorite toy is just up ahead.



Photo 5:
Discovering Mr. Giraffe in the tracking field!



Photo 6:
A happy Golden Retriever carrying away his prize.

In this same manner, you can use the dog's favorite article to help with a restart after a distraction. For example, if you are winter tracking and you can see deer tracks directly in front of you, place the favorite toy or article shortly after the deer tracks. When the dog reaches that location on the track and becomes distracted with the deer tracks, give him his restart command and get him moving forward on the track again. Due to your good planning, he will now be rewarded for passing over the deer tracks and continuing forward by getting his favorite toy (see photo 7).



Photo 7:
Finding a friendly dinosaur in the field
can provide the motivation for a restart.

I know that many beginner handlers have it drilled into their heads that the dog is the one that knows what is going on in the tracking field and handlers need to abandon the idea that they are in control. Although I agree with this statement in principle, I also believe there are times that the dog needs to be under the handler's control. The restart is one of those times. I expect it to be obeyed like any obedience command that I might give. Do you ask your dog to sit, and then do nothing if he ignores you? I don't. I go to the dog and put him into a sit.

I do the same thing in tracking. If my dog has his head stuck in a gopher hole checking to see if anyone is home, I will tell him to "Leave it" and "Go find!". If he chooses to ignore me, I will correct him just as I would correct him if he ignored a sit command or a recall. I would go to him, pull his head out of the gopher hole, hold on to his harness as I walk him back over to the track and wiggle my fingers in the grass to renew his interest in the track. I would continue to hold onto the harness for the first couple of steps to make sure that he is once again tracking and has gotten his mind off of the distraction. If gopher holes are a continuing problem for my dog, I would deliberately lay tracks that pass in close proximity to them. I would be sure to put a food drop or his favorite article shortly after the distraction to reward him for leaving the distraction and restarting the track.

When you feel confident your dog understands how to restart a track on command, you can proof the restart by making it a bit more difficult for the dog. You can place an article on a corner, for instance, which makes the restart more challenging. You can place articles at cover changes, or transitions, or right at an obstacle like a fence or a fallen tree. All of these circumstances make the restart more difficult for the dog.

I would also proof the dog by having the track head directly toward a crowd of people. Encourage your friends to talk or laugh, as the gallery might do at a test, and then encourage your dog to restart when the crowd noises distract him. This is very difficult for many dogs to do. Heading straight toward a crowd of people that are not moving out of your way can be intimidating. Have you never seen this at a test, though? I have seen the gallery line up on the road directly in front of a working team, patiently waiting for the tracking dog to indicate the final glove.

I would also proof my dog by "pooling" scent on the track. At a test, a track layer may stand on a corner for a minute or two looking for the next marker. Perhaps the next flag is down, or the fog has not yet lifted and the track layer is having trouble seeing the next flag. Maybe the flag is stuck in the ground and the track layer is having a hard time getting it out. Whatever the reason might be, I know that dogs need to be taught to restart after being sucked into one of these "pools" of scent. A restart command should get them moving and refocused on finding where the footprints continue to go instead of staying in the midst of the scent pool. You should periodically do this even on a straight leg. Simply stop walking and just stand there for two or three minutes. Bend over and retie your shoes. Sing a little song. Twiddle your thumbs or plan tomorrow's dinner. Just stay there long enough to leave a huge pool of scent and watch how your dog responds to it. If he cannot get beyond it, use your restart command and move forward several steps to get him going again.

Teaching your dog to restart is certainly a valuable lesson. If you have not yet taken the time to put the behavior on a verbal cue, I hope that you will do so. It will come in handy for you, and may even make the difference between a passing performance and a failing one.