

An Article About Articles

By Terri Everwine © November 2002

As a judge I've been presented with a number of incorrect articles by the tracklayers. Most of the other judges I've worked with have some of their own ideas about what is and is not an acceptable article. So let's take a look at the regulations and determine are acceptable articles for each of the levels of tests.

Starting with TD, the choice is easy. Chapter 3, Section 5 of the Tracking Regulations states quite simply: "The start article must be made of cloth and must be the approximate size of a glove or wallet. In a TD test, the last article will be a glove or a wallet." There are no restrictions as to the material of the final article. Clubs generally supply the tracklayer with the final article, usually a fabric or leather glove.

Looking at Chapter 2, one finds in Section 6 a further elaboration on articles in general. "All articles shall be inconspicuous in color in comparison to the surrounding terrain. All articles are to be about the same size as a glove or a wallet." This, then, is the reason for gloves most commonly being of the brown fabric type, rather than pink or yellow gardening gloves, or colorfully knit winter gloves. Moving on to TDX, the regulations state that "The TDX articles shall consist of four (4) personal, dissimilar articles, about the size of a glove or a wallet..." Further, "Only the last article may be a glove or a wallet." The accepted definition of "personal" is something that belongs to the tracklayer and can be uniquely identified as his or hers. For this reason, some judges do not like to see an adult present them with a child's slipper. The same goes for a square of leather. It just doesn't carry that "personal" connotation. Some examples of acceptable TDX articles might be: a towel or washcloth, a t-shirt, belt, or slipper. Bandanas and scarves are good, as are socks. Eyeglass cases and checkbook covers work well. Hats and headbands are popular, too, and come in a variety of shapes and sizes. If the item itself is larger than a glove or a wallet, it should be folded or rolled to the proper size. Keep in mind that the handler must pick it up and carry it, so large bulky items are not such a good idea as they are difficult to stash into a fanny pack or pocket. I've seen old swimsuits, and tops or bottoms to a bikini. I've seen underwear and boxer shorts, (and always hope it is not what the tracklayer wore the day before, but a designated article.) I've been presented with an extra glove as an article, but as mentioned above, the regulations clearly state that "Only the last article may be a glove or a wallet." I've never seen otherwise, but note that the regulations say the last article "MAY", not "must" or "shall" be a glove or a wallet. This leads me to believe that if a glove or a wallet is not available, some other personal item may be used. There is also no description of acceptable materials in TDX articles, but fabric and leather seem to be universally accepted, while metal and plastic are not.

For a VST test, we find a slightly different and more complete definition of articles. "VST articles shall consist of four (4) dissimilar, common, everyday items which can be easily carried by the handler and safely picked up by the dog. Each article shall not be smaller than 2" x 4" nor larger than 5" x 5" and shall weigh no more than 8 ounces. There shall be one leather, one plastic (rigid or semi-rigid) one metal and one fabric article..." The difference from TDX is the change from "personal articles" to "common,

everyday items" The fact that VST is an urban test makes it likely that test personnel will not be the only people wandering about any given site. Any article which looks as if it might have some value may very well disappear. For this reason it has become commonplace to use fairly innocuous articles for the test, rather than anything identifiable to passersby as possibly being of value. In the chapter of the regulations entitled "Guidelines for Tracking Tests", section 11 states that "To further establish credibility, articles used in variable surface tracking represent items made of substances used in everyday life that an average child or adult might carry and drop." The key word here is "represent". VST articles do not have to be actual items a person might carry with him, but must be representative of such items. The various substances they are made of is intended to represent the fact that while an adult may lose a set of keys, it is not necessary to put keys on a track, but to be able to demonstrate that the dog is capable of finding such an item made of metal. An example of fabric might be a scrap of cloth or a rag. The fabric category seems to bring out more in the way of personal articles with bandanas, eyeglass cases and the like being common. There is nothing in the regulations to prevent using a glove or a wallet as an article on a VST track, as long as it meets the requirements for material and size, but many judges refuse them for VST tracks. They certainly fit the definition of "common, everyday items". Equally, however, a piece of any fabric cut to fit the size regulations is also suitable and may stand a better chance of remaining in place when there is extraneous pedestrian traffic at the test site.

Metal articles can run the gamut from pieces of flat metals, to identifiable items such as candy tins, switch plates, hinges, fan blades, electrical boxes and other hardware store finds. Current thought is that certain galvanized metals hold scent better than things made of stainless steel. It stands to reason that the more surface area a metal article presents, the better it will hold scent. Sharp edges are to be avoided, so make sure you check your articles before use.

Plastic items are possibly the easiest to find, so many things are made of it these days! Soap dishes, sunglasses, plastic lids, computer disks, switch plates, coasters, the list is almost endless. Again, keep in mind the section of the regulations which refers to the safety of articles. A dog may pick up and bite down on an article, so hard plastic items which could shatter and create sharp edges should be avoided. As with all other VST articles, you'll want to avoid any item that could appear to be of value. A plastic toy truck may seem like great article, but when a neighborhood child wanders over the track and takes it home, well, you get the idea. Plastic articles can be made by cutting up old laundry detergent bottles or other containers from non-toxic substances. These of course should be scrubbed clean of any detergent or other residue before using as an article.

Leather articles are perhaps the most difficult to find in any kind of variety. Gloves and wallets, eyeglass cases and checkbook covers are the most common ready made leather items but once again present the possibility of being taken for things of value by passersby. Most leather articles are simply pieces of leather cut from other items, perhaps an old purse or old pair of shoes. Craft stores often have pieces of suede or leather available.

Tracklayers should prepare at least two of each type of VST articles for judges to choose from. As mentioned, some judges have certain preferences or dislikes in terms of articles and giving them a choice will help streamline the plotting process.

Most dedicated trackers have also become dedicated scavengers in their quest to find articles. I know I have far more articles than I can ever use in either training or tests! Somehow, collecting articles becomes something of a passion, and one can hardly walk through a hardware store without coming upon some item that brings the thought to mind, "Hey, that would make a great article." We don't throw away old clothing or purses, we cut them up for articles! A lost and found at your child's school at year end offers a bonanza of unclaimed hats and gloves and scarves, and who among us has not picked the odd item off the ground for a new article? Hopefully this "article" has given you some ideas and the next test you volunteer to lay track for will find you prepared with exactly the right articles for that test.