

## Getting Started

*By Terri Everwine © April 2008*

One of the most important elements of a track is the start. In TD work, the start is a given, with two flags indicating the direction of the first leg. Once you move to TDX and VST things get a little tougher. Only a single flag marks the start of the track, choosing the direction is up to your dog.

I like to begin training early on for single flag starts. Like every other aspect of a track, observation is a key player. From the beginning, you want to observe and recognize your dog's tracking behavior. This "beginning" includes everything from the approach to your flag, to a good start presumably on track on the first leg, and the observation and study of your dog as he continues to the final article.

Get started at your vehicle. Know that your equipment is in order. Your line untangled, the harness adjusted properly and whatever you carry with you is at hand. Be sure and check your water supply, and have some sort of receptacle for articles. Being sure of your equipment will help you to a calmer start, unworried about having forgotten something. If you plan to carry a spare line make sure it, too, is in good working order and ready if needed. If you carry water, be sure and have it with you!

Make sure you are comfortable putting on your dog's harness. Practice away from the tracking fields so you can get it on properly without ...flummoxing...your dog. When to harness is an issue best discovered as you work. Try several methods....at the flag, before the flag, or at the car. Many people prefer to harness at the start flag. To be successful you need a dog that is cooperative and calm. A not-so-calm dog may do better if harnessed several yards from the start flag and then brought in on a short line. Other dogs are better if they are harnessed at the vehicle and walked in, either on the harness or on the collar. The issue of when to switch the line from collar to harness is something else to learn about your dog. Again, either at the flag or before you approach. The only way to determine which is best is to try various methods, but once you've found the way that works best stick to it. It then becomes part of your start routine.

Once you have determined the best approach to the flag for you and your dog, the next step is to actually approach the flag. It is preferable to ask for a sit, a down, or even just a stand stay at the flag. This "pause", anywhere from a few seconds to a minute or two, gives you time to pick up the start article, present it to your dog, snap the line to the harness if needed, and be ready to go. This pause ensures that you will be able to pay attention to your dog when you ask for a start.

Pick up your start article and take it with you. Put it in a fanny pack or some other safe place. Carrying it in your hand is not advisable since more of your scent will be imparted. If needed, the start article is used to re-scent the dog and should still retain as much as possible of the original tracklayer's scent.

Most dogs give a correct indication of a start the very first time they leave the flag.

Only some will actually take that indicated line immediately. It is very common for a dog to check around a bit more before settling in to the track. Some dogs will indicate direction then circle. Some will cast back and forth. Some will apparently wander. Get to know how your dog prefers to start and be prepared for it. Do not just wander away from the flag to follow your dog if you know your dog is going to spend a few minutes checking the area of the start. Stand quietly at the flag. When your dog settles and makes an actual start, you may then leave the flag.

There are handlers who allow their dog to take running starts on tracks. The dog will pick up the tracklayers scent on the way to the flag and may be disinclined to pause at the flag. There's an article at the flag. One would hope that you have also worked on article indication and the start article is no exception. If for no other reason, the pause at the start should also represent an article find and should be marked by your dogs indication. This plays into the sit or down or stand and wait at the flag. The article should cue the correct behavior.

Ask for a start when both you and your dog are ready. You've given your dog scent from the article, you're both prepared. At your command, your dog should leave the flag and begin working.

There are a few ways to work specifically on starts. Essentially, all beginners doing straight line work are doing starts. Periodically returning to this straight line work reinforces good starts. There is no disadvantage to taking an advanced dog back to working straight line starts if your starts aren't exactly what you would like to see from your dog. It is often useful in working inexperienced dogs on single flag starts to place an article at the thirty yard mark where a second flag would be in a TD. This gives the dog a reward for a correct start. In more advanced work, each found intermediate article presents an opportunity to "restart" and is the basis of training for multiple articles.