

NATC BLOOD TRACKING TEST

As a full member group of the Deutscher Teckelklub, the NATC offers the official DTK blood tracking test, which is fully recognized by the FCI. It is a thousand meters long, laid with 1/4 of a liter of deer blood, and aged for 20 hours or more. It is an objective measure of your dachshund's competence in tracking wounded big game. There are some exceptions, but usually a good test dog is a good natural tracker. A Prize I Test Rating tells us more about the dog than an owner's statement: "My dog found 20 deer." Most of those "finds" may have come on easy tracks of 50 to 100 yards.

Here are some excerpts from the book, "Tracking Dogs for Finding Wounded Deer" by John Jeanneney. These may be helpful if you decide to enter your dachshund in the NATC/DTK Blood Tracking Test:

Call-backs

"In practical terms, the factor that plays the greatest single influence in determining scores is the dog's performance in staying close to, or right on, the blood line. This is described as "tracking and accuracy", but it is, to a large degree, a manifestation of the dogs "steadiness and concentration". The dog should not be out of scenting contact with the line for more than an estimated 75 meters. If the dog happens to be paralleling the line, the direction of the wind must be considered. Downwind of the blood line, a dog tracking parallel to it at a distance of 10 yards, may be following scent that has blown with the wind. If he parallels upwind, he is just being lucky. A dog that goes out farther than 75 meters from the blood line in a straight line is called back by the judges. But the handler should understand that his dog may also be called back by the judges for traveling 75 meters out of scent contact with the blood line even if he happens to stay within the 75 meter, straight-line, limit. Certain "call-backs" require judges' discretion. The judges have to decide whether the dog is actively looking for the line within the 75 meter limit and not just gambling or following a hot line that has nothing to do with the blood line. If the situation is really not clear, the dog should be given the benefit of the doubt.

The rule of all the tests is "three call-backs and you're out." For the highest rating, a Prize I, no call-backs are normally allowed. For a Prize II, the maximum number of call backs allowable is one; for a Prize III two call-backs are permitted. However, scoring a dog is based on much more than counting the call backs.

Since a skilled handler can read his dog and possibly has some general idea of where the line should be, he can pick up the dog and return to a point where he was confident that the dog was working the line. A skilled handler will do this when he senses that he is getting into trouble and wants to avoid a call back. The handler must request permission from the judges to reestablish his dog on the line, and he should give a reason for doing so, but it is perfectly correct to reestablish your dog on a sure point if you have doubts. A good handler, working a difficult natural line, sometimes does the same thing. Also, an inexperienced handler may make the mistake of taking his dog off the line when the dog is correct. Obviously, pick-ups with permission are to be desired over call backs,

but to many novices it is not so obvious that the pick-ups with permission have a price too."

Check Work and Wound Beds

"The tracking tests that we are discussing have three 90 degree turns, and the dog's work at these corners gives the judges a good opportunity to evaluate tracking and accuracy. Usually the dog will overshoot the turn to some extent. Judges can evaluate the promptness with which the dog recognizes that he has gone too far, checks back and reestablishes the line. The dog will generally swing a circle to the left or to the right of his point of loss until he cuts the line going off at right angles. A fast moving Drahthaar will usually check in a bigger circle than a slower dachshund, and all dogs cannot be judged against exactly the same model. Different breeds of dogs, and even different dogs within the same breed, will perform differently. What the judge looks for is an efficient style with a minimum of wasted motion for both dog and handler.

Judges give some importance to the finding of wound beds along the blood trial. The handler is supposed to report to the judges these scraped circles in the ground litter. To do so is to demonstrate that the dog is staying close to the line and allowing the handler to evaluate evidence left by the "animal" he is tracking. Many good handlers are so intent on reading their dog that they miss the wound beds. To report the wound beds is positive evidence of accurate trailing for both handler and judges. The evidence is useful for the judges, and it can give emotional support to the handler! The wound bed is sure proof that he is on the line even though no blood can be seen."

Test Tactics

"Psychologically, the best means of facing a test is to become so totally immersed and focused in what you are doing that you are oblivious to everything but your dog and the terrain. This is easier to accomplish if the test goes well than if the dog is floundering.

The handler should keep in mind that the first few hundred meters are usually the hardest. When the dog warms up mentally and locks in on the scent of the bloodline, performance often improves dramatically.

Most of the techniques for finding real wounded deer apply in test situations. At the start, go through the ceremony of putting on the tracking leash and collar exactly as you would for a real search. The judges will give you the direction of the line, and in some cases, the first 50 meters is marked. This simulates the live situation, where the hunter gives you the direction from the point where the deer was shot and frequently a blood line is visible. It is important to steady the dog and insist that he gets started on the right line. Talk to your dog and establish rapport.

In a test, the rules require the dog to work at, or nearly at, the full length of the tracking leash so that it is clear that the handler is not leading the dog. Normally you will not see very much blood and your time is better spent observing your dog. Remember,

blood that has been frozen and then thawed is brown rather than red; it is more difficult to see than the fresh blood from a live deer.

When you do see blood, or when your dog shows you blood, it is good strategy to mark this point so that you can return to it later if trouble develops. Often you can be confident that you are on the line simply by watching the dog's body language. In these cases mark the "sure points" if there is any possibility that you will need to come back to them later."

The Dog and Handler as a Team

The handler should go into the test with a goal and strategy appropriate for the dog and circumstances. For a Prize I, the handler must take some risks and just trust his dog to stay out of trouble. The better the dog, the easier it is to move forward boldly and without questioning. If the handler second-guesses his dog and repeatedly picks him up and takes him back to a sure point, he will probably forfeit his chances for a Prize I score of 100 or 92. For a perfect score you have to let your dog do all of the work without interference.

If things do not go well and the dog gets far enough off the line for a first call back, then the handler may decide that discretion is the better part of valor and take a more cautious approach. When he has doubts about whether the dog is staying within the 75 meter limit, he will take the dog back to a sure point. This has its costs in the "accuracy" and "steadiness and concentration" categories, but at this point, a second call-back is even worse.

With two call backs a handler determined to survive becomes very conservative indeed. A third call back will be fatal to hopes of passing the dog. No risks are taken and trust in the dog is minimal. On a simple course of straight lines and right angles, an excellent handler can get a marginal dog through the test with a just passing score of 50. This does not mean very much. When interpreting test results always consider the factor of handler input.

Blood tracking is always a team performance. In a Prize I performance, the dog is in control of the situation, and the handler's role is to focus the dog psychologically as needed. He should keep the tracking leash free and otherwise not interfere with the dog. With weaker or less experienced dogs, the handler's role must be more assertive. Judges score the dog, but they cannot help but take into consideration the finesse of the handling as well. With the best dogs and the best handlers, the judges can recognize the intuitive bond of understanding within the working partnership. For the handler under pressure it is a rare satisfaction to move into this mode where man and dog are in harmony and totally focused on the task of finding wounded game.