

TRACKING THROUGH DISTRACTIONS

BY JEFF SCHESSLER



Sometimes a K9 track/trail in an urban environment can be like an olfactory circus. We think we know what is happening, but with the plethora of scent pictures hammering away at the K9, perhaps there is more going on than we give the dog credit for. Yet, we humans have a tendency to rationalize what we think a track or scent trail is with amazing oversimplification; for some reason, we think we know where the scent is and how the dog should be able to detect it.

No matter how hard we try, we can never seem to smell what our dogs are detecting in the first place. Why do we act this way? It's pretty simple — humans have a tendency to want to control everything. However, scent tracking/trailing is just not something the handler can control. We can determine the tactics and the speed of a

Sometimes a K9 track/trail in an urban environment can be like an olfactory circus.

hunt, but we can never really say with any certainty where scent is or in what concentration.

That is the dog's job and we simply must interpret what the dog's body language tells us. The problem is we often have a tendency to push, prod and guide too much on a track, especially when impatient or under stress. We do this when the dog seems slow or inconsistent in our eyes. In actuality, the dog is doing nothing more than furiously nose canvassing the scene in an attempt to sort out the direction of a trail when

it might be covered up by hundreds of other trails leading in hundreds of different directions.

I constantly preach to let the dog work — slow down, stop pushing, be quiet — when working with my students. I do this because we have a tendency to be very large distractions to our dogs when they are tracking/trailing. Every time we move our feet, say, “Get to work,” or pull on the lead when the dog is working a scent scene, we become a distraction. Many handlers never see this as a problem.

Now, the opposite seems to be true at a time when we humans really need to get involved. That time is when the dog switches trails on us and we are oblivious to it. If there is a time to guide or control, then this is the time, but for the most part, jumping trail seems to be ignored and in many cases encouraged.

Why? Because we can't smell what the dogs smell and reading them is so darn difficult. The most nefarious reason is that this is often the time that the track looks the best to the handler because the dog's intensity level has changed to a higher level, so the dog is followed.

Distractions are usually in the form of a human or animal the dog has an affinity for. Dogs, cats and deer, in that order of priority, seem to be the top "jump trail" producers on the animal list. Human distractions are usually someone the dog knows well or very fresh cross tracks on an older trail. Both of these will trigger a quick switch from the original trail to the more appealing one in dogs with a propensity for this behavior.

To begin with, we will need to break down the distractions and the reason why they are a problem. Once we have identified the problems, we can generate solutions. No two dogs are exactly alike, so each program we have for fixing each issue may have to subtly change for each dog.

Animal distraction is usually ingrained in the dog long before tracking or trailing.

Animal distraction is usually ingrained in the dog long before tracking or trailing. It comes from allowing the dog to follow any animal odor at a whim. The simple act of letting a working dog pull you 20 yards to a bush it air scented so it can peruse the urine fragrance left behind from an earlier canine passerby is enough to set a bad standard. Some handlers don't think of this as a problem and happily follow the dog from bush to bush, tree to tree. The problem here is the dog is making the decisions on what to smell and when to smell it, and then the handler follows.



Distraction training begins with distraction exposure for dogs at an early age. If they are familiar with the distraction, they are less likely to be drawn to it in the future.

Here is the issue: Dogs do not think in a linear fashion like we do. They very much live in the moment and when something is OK at one time, it is OK during all others. If you allow your dog to pull you to any bush it wants to in order to satisfy the primal urge to investigate urine and mark it accordingly, then this will happen during tracking/trailing as well. It just comes with the territory.

At our kennel, we start our training with most of our police dog candidates at 8 weeks of age. The golden rule of the kennel is if the dog is on a leash it never dictates whether or not a bush or tree is checked for urine. The puppy is placed in an area to relieve itself and the handler stays there with the puppy circling until it goes. When walking to and from a location and the puppy wants to pull to a bush it is firmly told, "No! Leave it!" Because we start our pups this way, we rarely have animal distraction problems with our adult dogs working on the street. It is never too late to start this training process. Contrary to the old adage, "You can't teach an old dog new tricks," it is possible to retrain

an older dog. It just takes more time. If you do not want a dog to jump trail to a dog, then do not allow the dog to follow and investigate dog odor at any time you are with it.

Here is a new rule if you do not have it already: No animal scent is cute to hunt or follow when we are thinking of our working dogs. *All animal scent is off limits!*

Here is the issue: Dogs do not think in a linear fashion like we do. They very much live in the moment and when something is OK at one time, it is OK during all others.

People the dog knows are a huge problem for police tracking dogs and they always come in the form of your beat partners. Your dog knows these people and often likes them. We cannot use these people as training trail layers.

If we do, we pattern train the dog for specific odors if those odors are used over and over. I learned this after my dog found other officers doing neighborhood checks after burglaries when he should have been on the suspect's trail. This is when I first began to examine who I was using for training. I got lazy and instead of looking for new people, I used whoever was available, quickly. In doing so, I created a dog that would jump trail to police officers in a nanosecond when that scent became available. I had to retrain him with lots of work after the fact and that is never a good thing.

The bottom line is that if we use our partners as subjects during tracking/trailing training and those same partners might be out in the middle of your search area during a real hunt, there is a very good chance your dog could jump trail. The only way to reduce this possibility is to not train for it. We constantly talk about muscle memory when discussing tactics in police work. Tracking the same beat partner subjects over and over is muscle memory for the dog; don't do it.

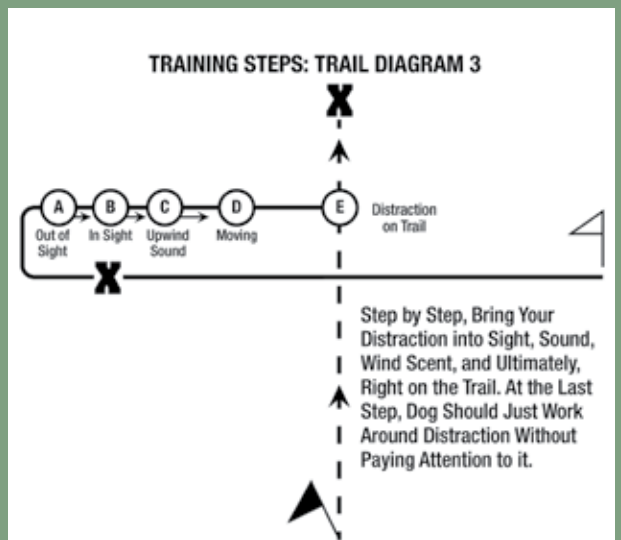
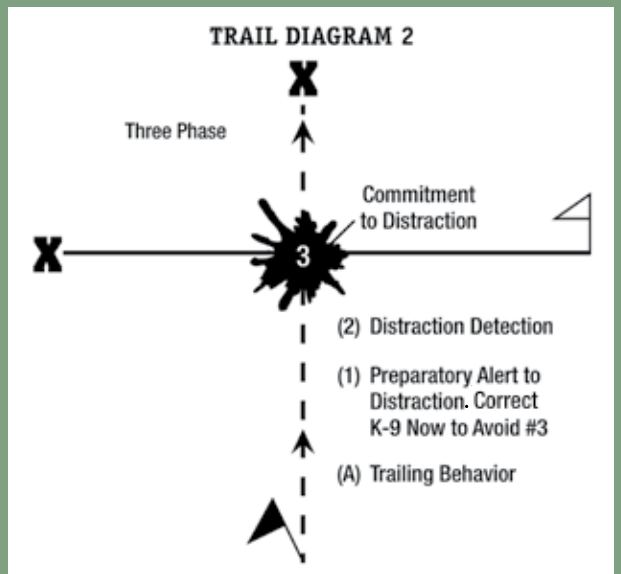
The third human distraction is the fresh human cross track over the top of a very old suspect track. This can be incredibly difficult to correct especially if it is ingrained. The very fresh prey track simply follows the wild canid instinctual response for tracking. After all, the quickest way to prey is by following the freshest trail. This is where training comes in. The dogs must learn that they are not allowed to jump trail to a fresher track of an uninvolved subject. The same condition applies to all other distractions as well. It is not so much a matter of learning to read the body language so you know when your dog is switching odors, as it is to teach the dog that it is unacceptable to switch odors.

Tracking the same beat partner subjects over and over is muscle memory for the dog; don't do it.

So, how do we solve the problem once we know it is occurring? The first part of solving any problem is identifying it precisely. We need to know exactly what it is, where it is and what the dog looks like when it happens. The easiest way to determine all of these factors is to set them up in advance so we can see the process unfold. I recommend doing that with video. Record the moment in all its glory so you can look at it from a different perspective, when you are not behind the lead.

To start, you will need some good logistics in place and a little bit of preplanning. The location should be free of other trail, visual or audible distractions. A park well after hours and

Distraction



open woods free of foot traffic are places I like to use. If a human cross track is the suspected culprit, then you will need two people for a trail layer subject and a trail layer distraction.

Start by having the trail layer subject lay a fairly straight trail from one location to another. I prefer a soft surface environment with lots of shade to make sure that the dog is missile locked on the subject scent throughout the trail if possible. The total length of the correct trail should be approximately 200 to 300 yards and the wind should not be in the dog's favor. We do not want the dog air scenting the subject prior to the distraction trail that will be coming soon. The age of the trail should be at least 30 minutes to one hour old.

The next step of the game is to have a second human subject circle around to a halfway point of the subject trail and lay a cross track over the top of it.

At the intersection of the two trails, I recommend that the distracting human mark this spot with something that the handler can see from a long way off. A couple of flags indicating the direction of the cross track are great, but you can also use bright colored carpenter's powder chalk that is squirted onto plants and trees. I really like the latter because the chalk does not have a human scent picture component. The marking should start about five yards from the intersection and five yards after. In this way the handler can see the upcoming intersection from a long distance. This is probably the most important part of this exercise.

It can be difficult for the distraction trail layer to find the exact intersection with the subject trail layer, so it is a good idea for the subject trail layer to mark the midpoint of the trail with a very bright ribbon that can be hung on

a tree branch. This gives the distraction trail layer a target as well. The distraction should gather this ribbon and take it away as it will be a strong scent source to which the dog may also react.

I like my human distraction trail layer to make the cross track and then double back the same way he came and exit the area completely. The only distraction I want at this point in the training is the track, not an air scent of the distraction subject nearby. This is for a later time and another training problem.

I like my human distraction trail layer to make the cross track and then double back the same way he came and exit the area completely.

FIND WHATEVER YOU'RE LOOKING FOR.

THE STRION® FAMILY OF BEAM OPTIONS

To do quality work, you need quality tools. Our rechargeable Strion® family offers you power and performance in an ultra lightweight and compact size. By incorporating a lithium battery, this line of lights is lighter and brighter than most on the market. The standard Strion® LED gives you the ultimate balance of brightness, reach, and runtime. Get your hands on the ultra wide 500 lumen Strion LED HL® when you need to fill the scene with light. Or when you need a beam that slices deep into the darkness but still provides significant peripheral light, the 615 lumen Strion® HPL™ gives you a 400 meter beam with 2x the hot spot, plus the width of the HL beam. No matter what you're looking for, make sure you're looking for it with the right Strion® from Streamlight.

STRION® LED
260 LUMENS
200 METER BEAM

NEW STRION® HPL™
615 LUMENS
400 METER BEAM

STRION LED HL®
500 LUMENS
200 METER BEAM

STREAMLIGHT
Heroes Trust Streamlight

30 EAGLEVILLE RD, EAGLEVILLE, PA 19403 | 800.523.7488
CONNECT WITH US WWW.STREAMLIGHT.COM



A series of photos from a distraction trail set up for a patrol K9. The K9 shows clear body language that he picked up human scent and is following it. It encounters a cross dog track with urine and now the body language changes. The key to seeing the change is marking the distraction so the handler can be prepared to view the response. In other words, the handler has to know the problem is looming large through visual recognition. The primary and most common body language indicators are: Tail drop, head "pop" to the distraction, fanning nose to the source, and nose plant on the source with a further tail drop. Because the cross track with urine was marked, the handler could see it coming and correct his dog with decent timing. This made it very possible for the dog to go right back to the correct trail and more importantly, understand that what he was doing was not allowed any longer.

Now we have a subject trail that is anywhere from 30 minutes to one hour old and a distraction cross track that is far fresher, perhaps only a few minutes. Start the dog on the subject track and get things rolling. The key here is to be prepared for body language changes that indicate the distraction is about to occur.

There are normally three phases to every distraction. The first is the “preparatory phase” of the distraction or the proximity alert to it. This is a non-identifying alert. The dog is only aware that something is about to happen and has not determined what it is or where it is going. This body language is usually a head-up posture and an intensity change. The distance of this alert is never consistent. It is impossible to say with certainty when and where it will occur, but it is usually based on wind and environmental conditions. This first phase usually occurs within 50 yards of the cross track but sometimes farther out or almost on top of the cross track.

The second phase is what I call the “detection phase.” This is when the dog detects the actual cross track. The body language here is what I call a head-pop in the direction of the exit track. The head and neck will “pop” to the direction of the track and the body will soon follow. The dog has now detected the cross track completely and is in the process of investigating it.

The third and last phase is the “commitment phase.” This is when the dog knows exactly what it has found and has decided to follow it. The dog is now actively trailing the bad track. The huge problem is that the body language here looks identical to the real subject track. The second component to the huge problem is that any correction given now is truly meaningless. Because the dog has switched to another track and is now committed to it, the original track is now no longer on the dog’s mind. Even if we succeed in correcting

The key to correction is in the preparatory phase or the detection phase, for it is only in these phases that the dog is still in the process of following the original track.

the dog off the bad track and back onto the correct one, when the dog encounters the correct track and follows it again, it becomes a new track.

The key to correction is in the preparatory phase or the detection phase, for it is only in these phases that the dog is still in the process of following the original track. Think about it as if you were house training your dog. If you correct the dog after the fact with a yell or a swat to the butt, the dog only sees you as the problem. On the other hand, if you catch the dog when it is looming for a place to defecate and get it outside, you solve the problem.

The first time you try this exercise it may be impossible to correct the dog fast enough and this is because the average handler does not have the muscle memory for it. There is no precedent for the action. It might be best to catch it on video and correct the best you can and then do the exercise again later.

When I correct a dog for thinking about switching tracks, I do it verbally first. I use the command “Leave it!” and I do this with authority. I do not question, I command. The dog must know that I mean business. If he does not come off the bad scent, then I give the command again with more inflection. If this does not work, I lead snap the dog over the top of this back so he knows that he is wrong and comes off quickly. I call this “snapping a wrinkle in his ass.”

This exercise will have to be repeated several times with most dogs. The

inclination to follow a fresh cross track is instinctual and goes back to many millennia of scent imprinting in canid species. The fresh track means a quicker meal. It is difficult to overcome this response but not impossible.

Distraction training does not stop here. There are several stages to overcome distractions and this is simply a start. Other distractions include moving cross tracks and distractions that run from the dog. Remember: *track hard, track safe!* ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jeff Schettler is a retired police K9 handler and certified military trainer, and was attached to the FBI’s Hostage Rescue Teams’ K9 Assistance Program. He has worked hundreds of trailing cases across the nation and is a specialist in the area of tactical tracking applications. Schettler’s work has been seen on CNN, ABC, CBS, *Unsolved Mysteries* and *Mythbusters*. He is considered an expert witness in tracking/trailing and is the author of four books on K9 tracking work, including “K9 Trailing; The Straightest Path” (www.EliteK9.com). He also writes for *Police K9* and *K9 Cop*.

This article was originally published in the Sept./Dec. 2014 issue of *Police K-9 Magazine* and is reprinted with permission. (policek-9magazine.com)