

Following Ghosts

Attaining the Elusive Tracking Dog Excellent Title

Last October in Sprague, Wash., I had the honor of being a part of the minority of the dog-fancy population who successfully completed an AKC TDX test. According to general chatter on tracking-related e-mail listserves, the passing rate for AKC tracking tests is relatively low: 52 percent for the TD (Tracking Dog, an entry level test), 17 percent for TDX (Tracking Dog Excellent, an advanced level test) and about 5 percent for VST (Variable Surface Tracking, an advanced level test in an urban setting).

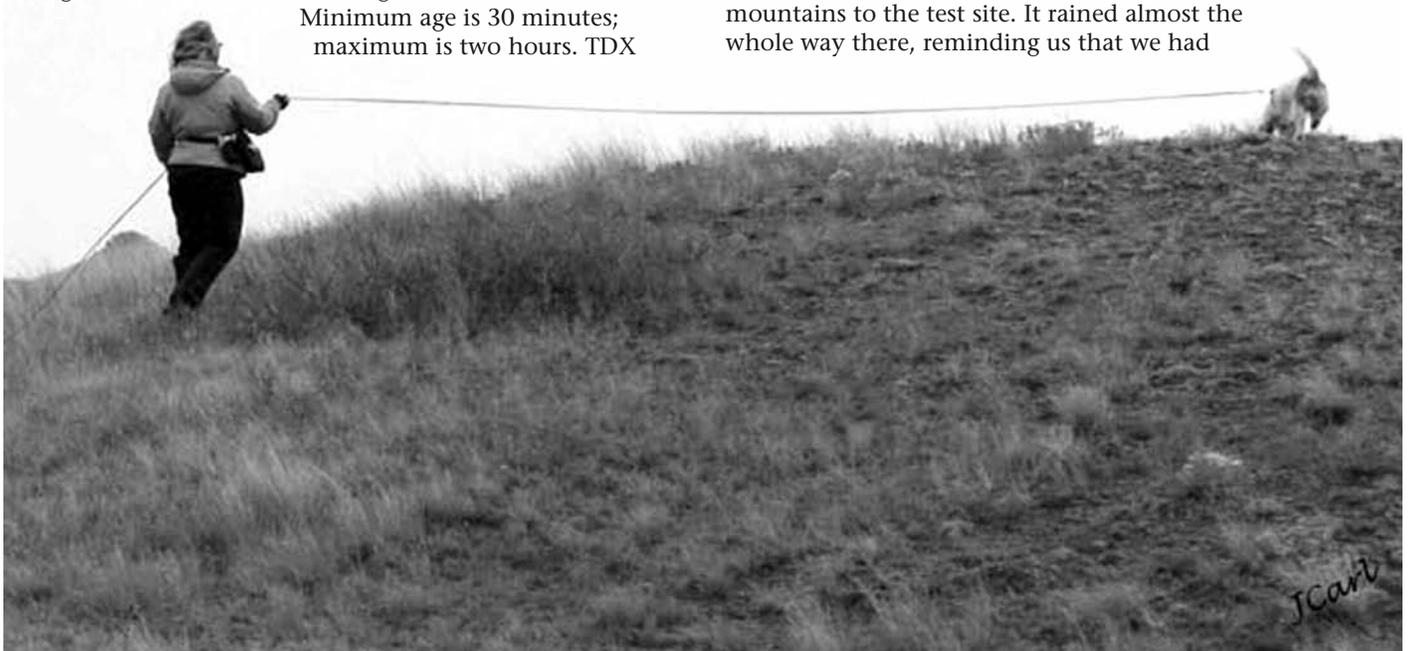
First, thanks to all of the volunteers and members of the Spokane Dog Training Club and the three judges — Debra Hannah [TD], Suzanne Schwab [TD/TDX] and Roy Fair [TD/TDX] — for making this opportunity available. This was a combined test with four TD entries and three TDX entries. It takes a lot of work on the part of volunteers to make the sport of tracking a reality. Tracklayers and judges arrive on the test site the day before the test. They plan and pre-plot a separate track for each individual dog. A TD track is approximately one-quarter mile in length while a TDX track is almost one-half mile long. On test day, all the volunteers come back in the wee hours of the morning to lay the tracks so they will be aged appropriately. TD tracks are put in an average of one hour before the dog and handler run them.

Minimum age is 30 minutes;
maximum is two hours. TDX

tracks are aged a minimum of three hours (maximum of five hours) before they are run. To add to the complexity of a TDX track, two other people (cross-tracklayers) create a diversionary track that crosses the primary track in two different places. These cross-tracks are put in about one and one-half hours after the primary track has been laid. TDX tracks will have between five and seven turns, will include terrain changes and will have three articles (in addition to the start article) that the dog must find. That's a lot of walking and planning.

The excitement started when I received an e-mail from the test secretary early in October letting me know that we had made the draw and would be participating in the TDX test on the 31st. Within minutes, my friend and training buddy and I had texted back and forth to let each other know we had both gotten into the test. Because tracking tests have a limited number of slots available per test, entrants are chosen through a random draw. Teams who do not make the draw are placed on an alternate list in case a space opens up at the last minute.

Bright and early at 5 a.m. on Sunday, my friend and her Bernese mountain dog, Cadi, picked Nara and I up in their mini van and we began the four-hour drive over the mountains to the test site. It rained almost the whole way there, reminding us that we had



both left our raincoats at home. Luckily for us, the rain tapered off just as we neared the test site. This made for excellent conditions for a tracking test. The ground was moist (wet for the TD tracks) but not frozen, and the day continued with cloudy skies and light winds with occasional gusts of perhaps 10 mph. The ground cover consisted of natural field grasses, all brown this time of year, sandy/rocky soil and some muddy places along and close to the "road." There were flat areas, hills and a variety of rock outcroppings, dry creek beds and lots of loose rocks, coyote dens and other varmint holes to fall in and trip over.

We arrived about halfway through the TD tracks. While we didn't get to watch the TD dogs strut their stuff — two dogs passed, a golden retriever and a flat coated retriever, while two, a smooth collie and a cocker spaniel, did well but made a mistake along the way — we did have plenty of time to walk the dogs and settle in before the draw. For those new to the sport of tracking, there are two random draws. The first determines who gets to run the test and the second determines team running order. The draw usually consists of a pile of small gifts, each with a number hidden underneath. This time the draw items were small dog toys, a bonus for Nara as the toys were PBGV-sized rather than Bernese mountain dog-size, so Nara went home with two new toys.

I was the first to draw, and we were assigned track number three — Nara and I would be the last team to run this day. My friend would go first, and a Belgian terverein dog would run the second track. One of the nice things about tracking tests is that they are not scored. Each team either passes or fails, and there is no one overall winner. Thus there is a great sense of camaraderie and less emphasis on competitiveness. One team works at a time, allowing the rest of us to watch from the sidelines and cheer everyone along.

I sometimes think it is much more nerve-wracking to watch others complete their test tracks than it is to complete your own. Cadi and my friend were the first to begin their track. Unfortunately, Cadi was a bit distracted and never really got started. She circled around at the start taking a long time to commit to a direction. When she did finally chose a direction, it was the wrong one, and we soon heard the sound of the

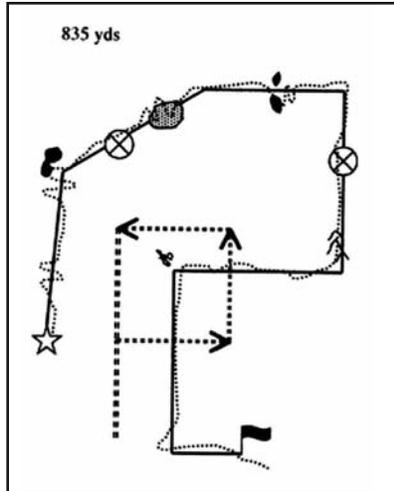
judges' whistle followed by the sad sigh of the gallery on the sidelines. The second dog started well, made the first and second corners and then ran into trouble. She made a right turn, went a few feet and came back, then went 180 degrees in the opposite direction and came back. In spite of all the positive thoughts emanating from the spectators, the dog circled back and then committed to the cross tracks, and we heard the judges' whistle yet again.

Next it was our turn. I always find it amazing how as soon as I hook the line to Nara's harness and we step off, all of the chaos of the rest of the world dissolves and there we are in our own perfect universe. We approached the start flag at what turned out to be a slight angle. Nara paused to sniff the start article and then took off right away,

without giving me the chance to think about anything. Usually she circles a bit at the start while she decides which way to go, but not this time. After 50 yards, Nara began circling a bit. I stopped and waited, took a couple of steps backwards, and then she made her decision. She turned to the right and bounded along the second leg. She made another right turn 130 yards later, then circled back to check the other direction, decided not, and returned to her original course, pulling strongly into the line. We learned later that our cross tracks were on this leg and the next. Nara didn't even noticeably look at them. What a good girl!

We went over a rocky area devoid of vegetation, and then she suddenly turned left and headed straight up a steep hill. I paused, thinking, "Really?" She turned her head back to give me dirty look and continued up the hill. It was a good thing I followed, as she was correct. We were now on the fourth leg and more than 300 yards into the track, and I was beginning to worry about the fact that we hadn't found any articles yet (we've failed for missing article before) but Nara was pulling me strongly up the hill and I hadn't heard the whistle yet, so we kept going. We crested the hill, went a few more yards and Nara stopped, nosed something in the grass and wagged her tail. It was the first article — a blue leather eyeglass case. Phew!

I picked up the case and waved it over my *continued on next page*



A map of Nara's passing track. The solid line is the actual track walked by the tracklayer — the flag is the start, the star is the end. The circles with x in them indicate location of the articles. The heavier dotted line with the arrows shows the cross tracks, and the smaller dotted line shows Nara's path along the track. The other symbols represent differences in terrain.

Below: As Nara and Teresa head up a hill, they are watched by judges Hallett, Schwab and Fair.



The star of the day, Nara, with owner Teresa Keenan (kneeling). Standing from left are track layer Jim Hallett, judge Suzanne Schwab and judge Roy Fair.

Ghosts *continued from page 27* head to show the judges we had found it. I barely had time to stuff it in my fanny pack before Nara took off down the track. We headed down the other side of the hill and made a left turn into a low, rocky area between the mesas. There was no circling or checking at this corner, just a solid left turn. There was less grass here, just lots of rocks and some low brown and orange type of mossy vegetation.

She worked back and forth and around some of the larger rocks. We soon made an open angle turn to the left and then worked our way through a dry pond. Along the way, Nara stopped and ate something — most likely elk or deer poo, it's quite the delicacy according to Nara — then went a few more yards, stopped again, stuck her nose behind a rock and wagged her tail. I walked up to see what she was doing and there, much to my happy surprise, was the second article, a black square of cloth.

I told her what a good girl she was and barely had enough time to scratch the top of her head and wave the article for all to see before she spun around and bounded off again along the track. I quickly tried to stuff the cloth in my fanny pack while following behind and trying not to stumble on the uneven ground.

We soon came out of the low area into a flattish grassy area. About 100 yards further on, she started checking around, then made an open angle turn to the left. I could see the cars and spectators in the distance off to our left so was thinking we must be getting close to the end as we were heading back toward the road. Nara tracked up to a raised rocky area and started nosing around. I walked up, thinking that it might be an article, but nothing was there. I asked her to get back to work, to find her cookies, because they must be close by somewhere out here. She circled around, then stopped and held her nose to the wind, just standing there sniffing. I nearly had a heart attack and thought,

“Great, we've come this far and now we get distracted by something better smelling than our tracklayer.”

I asked her where her cookies were and she put her head back down, crisscrossing back and forth. Finally, she chose a direction that felt like it was similar to the way we had been traveling prior to our short break. She went about 40 yards and stopped. She didn't look at the ground or at me, but stood still and wagged her tail. I could see something brown about a foot to her left. I asked her what she found, and she turned to look at me while I walked up to see — sure enough, it was the glove. As I picked it up and waved it above my head, the rest of world came back into focus and I could hear cheers from the judges behind and from the people by the cars. We had finally done it. We'd earned the coveted TDX title. Wow!

In the booklet by John Rice and Suzanne Clothier, “Following Ghosts: Developing the Tracking Relationship,” the authors say this about tracking:

“To become part of the tracking team, you have to be willing to read and trust your partner who, at the end of that long tracking line, is the only one who can see the ghosts that you're following. It is a relationship unlike any other shared by handlers and dogs. In learning to follow and trust your partner in pursuit of ghosts, you will find much more than a few articles. You'll find a whole new relationship with your dog.”

They are so right. There's nothing like following your dog on a great track, watching them problem solve and figure out where the scent goes. It's just an incredible dance, and I feel blessed to have such a great partner. I'm looking forward to spending many more miles following ghosts with my best friend. ■

Teressa Keenan and Nara live in Missoula, Mont. Her article on training a PBGV for tracking will be in an upcoming issue of Saber Tails. E-mail Teressa at rioghailClan@gmail.com.

