

Hot on the Trail

Variable surface tracking stimulates a dog's expert scenting abilities and opens up a new world to handlers.

Susan M. Ewing

Tracking is getting to see the invisible." That's how Maura Hogan feels when she takes the field with her Belgian Tervuren, Malibu, to follow a track. "There's a whole level of knowledge about the world that I can tap into by watching [my dog]," Hogan says. "As a handler, you participate in a track, but as a partner, not a boss."

Malibu, or Boo as she's affectionately called, has earned a TDX (Tracking Dog Excellent) title, and she and Hogan are now working on a VST (Variable Surface Tracking, which incorporates tracking over different surfaces, such as grass, asphalt and soil) title. Malibu is "driven to complete a task, interested in the puzzle and able to concentrate for long periods of time," Hogan says. "Any breed can track. What's important is the brain of the individual dog, not the nose."

Tracking titles

The American Kennel Club offers three tracking titles. TD (Tracking Dog) is relatively straightforward, with three to five turns in a track, no major obstacles and two scent articles the dog must find: one at the beginning and one at the end. The track must be between 440 and 500 yards long and is aged anywhere from 30 minutes to two hours. (Aging is the time that passes between when a track is laid and when the dog begins to follow it.)

The TDX is more difficult, with a track between 800 and 1,000 yards and five to seven turns. The track is aged three to five hours, and the dog must indicate it has found four scent articles. The track contains at least two obstacles, such as a fallen tree, a stream or a fence. TDX tracks also have two cross-tracks, which are laid by another track-layer across the original track. The dog has to stick to the original track and not follow one of the cross-tracks.

Then there's VST. To try for the VST title, dog and handler must first have earned either a TD or a TDX. (Dogs that earn all three tracking titles are designated CT, or Champion Tracker.) The length of a VST track is between 600 and 800 yards. A VST track has between four and eight turns.

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