

# Read Any Trailing or Tracking Dog

*by*  
*Understanding Negative Indications*



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&  
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*Read any Trailing or Tracking Dog  
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## Introduction

There are basic movements all dogs make while trailing or tracking. When you become familiar with those basic movements you will find an ability to understand or read your K-9. We hope this book will help you accomplish that goal.

### HOW DOGS WORK A TRAIL

Understanding how dogs work in their natural element is the key to reading a dog on a track or a trail. K-9's don't follow a trail such as a ball on a string. While tracking or trailing a dog must actually eliminate directions of travel in order to follow his prey. Since all dogs go through this elimination process when following prey, they show the same basic movements. These movements are called "*Negative Indications*" and are generally subtle.

Using and understanding the negative indicators will help you "read" your dog and understand the information he is giving you. If you cannot accurately read your dog, you will not be able to help him when he is faced with sorting out a tough problem. Remember, when working a trailing dog, you did not teach him "nose to the ground." You are working as a team, helping him focus on the scent you want him to follow, but letting him do it naturally.

By learning to read his natural instinctive movements when trailing prey, you will form a tighter bond with your dog and learn to trust the information he gives you while working. A patrol K-9 trained to track will not show the "negative indications" as frequently as a trailing K-9. However, at some point the dog will revert to his natural instincts while sorting out a problem, which is when you will see the movements, mentioned above. The confidence you gain from understanding the information your dog is giving you, will lead to greater success when trailing or tracking.

## PUTTING THE KNOWLEDGE TO WORK

**A**s you become familiar with the negative indications, you will be able to keep a running map in your mind of where your subject is heading, and know with each indication you still have the trail. When you stop seeing any of these indications, while the dog is just moving straight ahead and not giving any movements of purpose. This is a good indication the dog has lost his focus and possibly the trail. The joy is, by remembering the point of your last indications, you will know where you last had the trail. Thereby giving you a point where you should be able to recover the trail.

Another skill you will learn is being able to eliminate directions of travel by reading the negative indications. With each indication comes more information about where the trail is not. The result is narrowing down the direction the trail could have gone. For example, let's say you close on a subject who has entered a building and has not exited. Understanding your dogs' negative indications will eliminate the area around the building, letting you know the subject has not exited and is still in the building. Although, we all train for the dog to indicate on the door the subject used entering the building, we can use what indications the dog gives naturally to finish the trail without the "Door ID".

## THE PRE-SCENT

**T**he start is the most critical part of any successful trail. Using the "pre-scent" method is the most effective way to help dogs begin the right direction of travel. A harness can be a helpful equipment cue to let the dog know it is time to go to work. It is not actually the harness that cues the dog, but the motions you go through putting the harness on. Realizing that, I have found, that if I let the dog smell the scent article at the beginning of those motions, the dog will look for the trail before I get the harness on. This gives the dog time to sort out the direction of travel before giving him the command to start working.

As you harness the dog, after pre-scenting, watch his head, he will normally tell you which direction he needs to go by glancing that way before you ever finish getting him harnessed. As you become familiar with this technique, you will be able to recognize when your dog is not focused on the task in the first place. Being able to recognize when your dog is not focused will help determine how much credibility this start should be given. If the dog is not focusing on the scent in the beginning, the odds are you are not going to run

a successful trail. So you “pre-scent, harness, and scent,” once more before giving the command to find.

Teaching a new dog this method is simple. Have someone entice the dog to follow as they run away. Do not let the dog follow them. Walk the dog around until you see him lose his focus on the runner. Then take the dog to the starting area and face him away from the direction of the runner and use the pre-scent technique. He will focus towards the direction of the trail. After a couple of runaways, use a scent article start and notice the dogs’ head as he searches for the scent. Older more experienced dogs may head check without having to do the training exercise.



*The “pre-scent” head indications*

## THE BEGINNING CIRCLE

**T**he beginning circle movement is a positive indication. In this movement the dog is moving slightly, and does not appear to be working. Next you will see him change direction in a quick tight circle. This movement comes when he has sorted everything and is ready to commit to the trail. You will see this a great deal at the beginning of a trail, unless, you use the pre-scent method. Understand what the dog has just told you. He has eliminated the direction of travel that he was facing before the turn and showed commitment to the direction the trail has taken. As a handler, you know the trail did not go the direction your dog was facing and that he has found the trail.

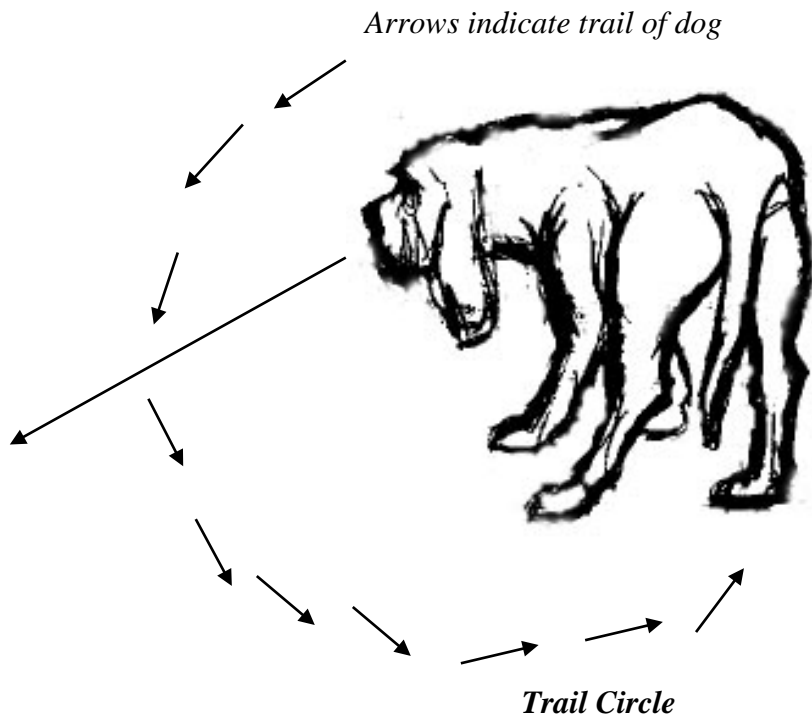
When running tracks or trails there will be different times the dog will show you a beginning circle other than the beginning of the trail. One example might be when your dog has been running the fringe of a scent and comes across the actual footsteps of the subject. The dog will start in one direction, make a tight circle, and reverse directions to correctly follow the trail. This movement alerts you to the same information regarding direction of the trail and that the dog is firm on the trail. In another example, the dog has skipped part of the track to cross a barrier such as a stretch of asphalt, and gives this circle motion on the other side. At this point, you have recovered the trail and the dog has eliminated at least one direction of travel. Reading this negative indication will tell you at least two things, you have the trail and you have eliminated direction of travel. Always remember the last negative indication received from your dog to form a running map in your mind to the direction the trail is headed. It is important to note that if you see this indication with a change in animation in your dog, it is a good signal he has gotten on the scent of an animal and needs to be checked.



*The beginning circle*

## THE TRAIL CIRCLE

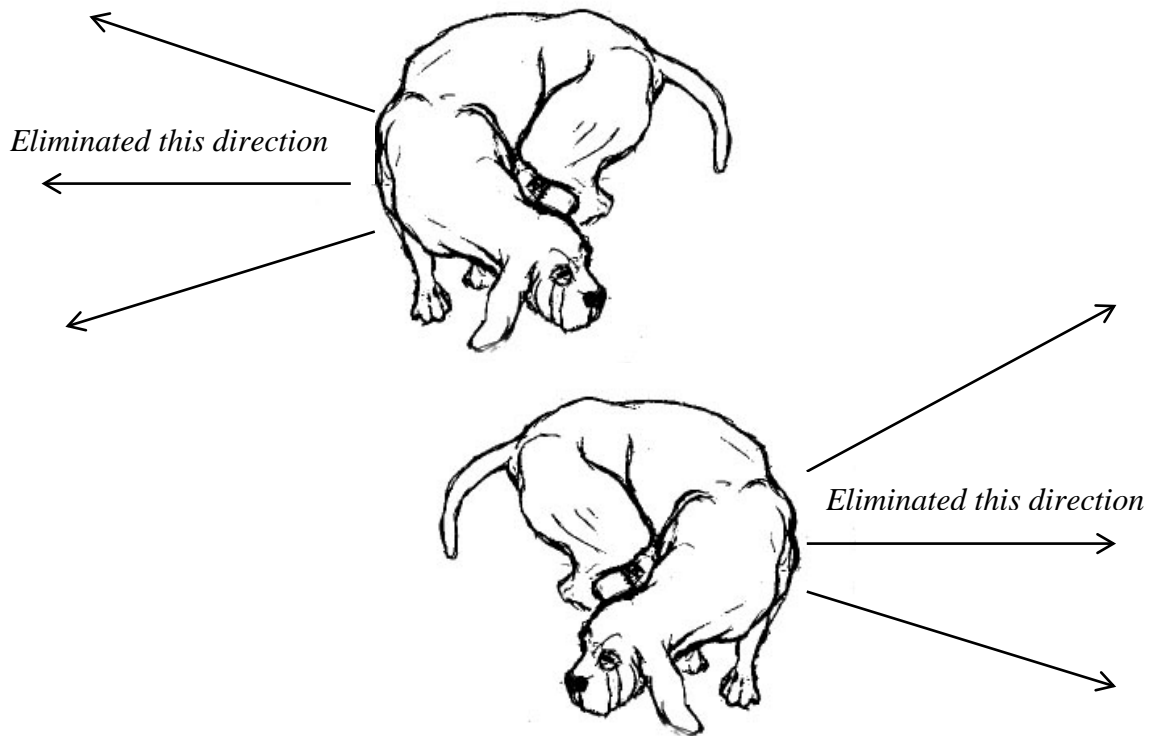
As the dog is running a trail and he makes a circle, it indicates one of two things; he has lost the direction of the trail or the trail itself. Both are negative indications. What is important is that the dog just told you he is still focused on his job because a circle movement indicates he is still looking for the scent. When your dog pulls out of the circle and moves in a direction outside the circle, it is a positive. A positive response directly after a negative one, lets you know he has recovered the trail. It is important not to line check or hinder the dog while he is circling because he is reacting on instinct. Once he has committed to a direction of travel, by tightening the line back and pulling hard, you can line check him. The circles that a dog makes are not necessarily symmetrically correct, so it is important to recognize what the dog just did. At times, your dog might slow dramatically before they circle, which makes the circles easy to miss. Occasionally he may also do multiple circles following the trail. Remember not to hinder your dog, be patient and wait for them to commit. When the dog pulls out of its' circle, you can eliminate the other three directions on the map your keeping in your mind.





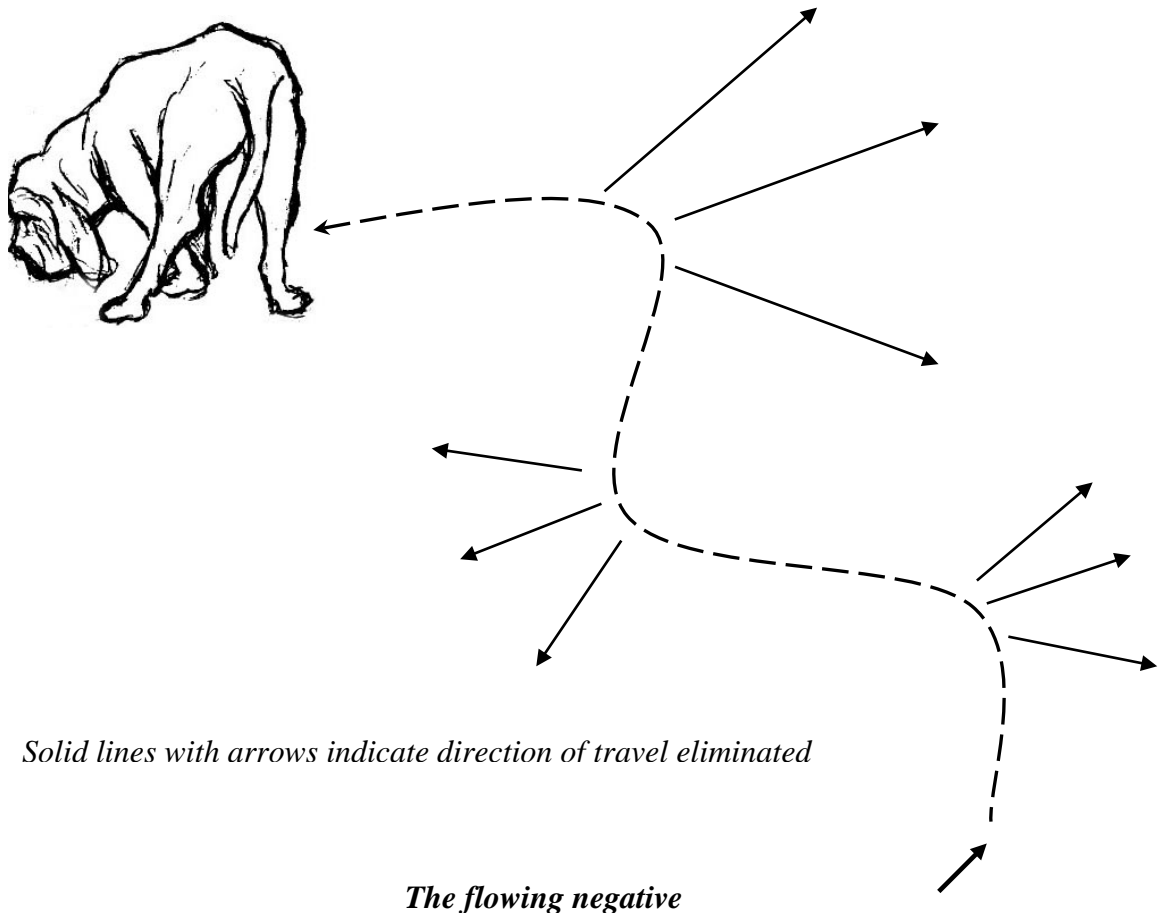
## THE CLASSIC CUTBACK

The classic cutback is the movement most often seen when trailing. Many handlers think the movement occurs when the dog has reached the end of the scent cone. I believe that to be correct, except the handlers have not realized the information the dog gives you when he does the cutback movement. Remember dogs must eliminate directions of travel while following a trail. Applying that theory to this movement gives you two important pieces of information. The dog just eliminated the direction he cutback from and he still has the trail. The map you are making in your head grows with each of these movements that your dog gives to you. By eliminating the direction your K-9 turned back from, and remembering the last indication, you will find yourself closing in on your subject.



## THE FLOWING NEGATIVE

**T**he flowing negative movement is very similar to the classic cutback. The difference between the two movements is subtle. The dog turns smoothly back, rather than abruptly. It is easier to miss or not understand what the dog just did because it looks so natural or inconspicuous. Those of you that have run urban streets have probably seen the dog give this movement as you past some driveways. The dog will ease into the driveway a little and ease back out in one constant flowing motion. That slight variation in his directional heading lets you know he just eliminated a direction of travel, via the driveway, and he is still focused. You also know he still had the trail at that point. This movement is best described as a bow in an otherwise straight line. Some dogs will do this constantly in tight patterns. By watching for them and understanding the meaning of this movement, you can always eliminate directions of travel in your running map and be assured your dog still has the trail.



## THE HEAD TURN

The head turn movement is normally done when the dog passes over what we refer to as “trash scent” or scent that belongs to something other than his prey. This is seen a lot when running your dog down store fronts in an urban setting. The dog will lift and turn his head in the direction of the “trash scent” and go back to the head down position without breaking stride. The movement of his head lets you know two things. The subject did not go that way and the dog is still working. When you see a double look, longer glance, or the dog is no longer committed to a direction of travel, you will know which direction the scent of your subject is coming from the same as you would during the “pre scent” phase. It is important to observe the difference in the head turns. For example, the dog intermittently keeps popping his head to the left side of the road and lifting his head like when air scenting. This is a good indication that you will find your subject on the left side of the road, even though you may go through many turns and indications before finally closing on your subject.



*The Head Turn on Trail*

Those of you handling Bloodhounds, or similarly trained dogs, will at times see your dog give the head turn indication as you pass by people. The dog is telling you the same thing he would with the doorways and driveways. Except now you know three things. It is not person we seek, I still have the trail, and it is getting hot (fresh trail). Dogs running old trails do not waste time doing a courtesy check or acknowledging decoys with a head turn as they pass them. As the trail starts getting fresher, he may start to check someone with the turn of his head. You will have to see how cold of a trail your dog runs before he quits swinging his head towards decoys. This will also change as the dog becomes more efficient in his work. Understanding and recognizing this indication will also help you discern when your dog was given a bad scent article and is working a fresh trail, and when the person you seek has been missing for a substantial amount of time.

The key to seeing a lot of information beyond the negatives listed, is watching the dogs' head. Like seeing the dog sight in on some vegetation on the other side of the parking lot or other barriers. You will know he is "skip tracking" that barrier, although the trail probably heads in that direction. If he cannot recover, you know where he started the skip, and can react accordingly.

## THE RECOVERY TRAIL

The recovery trail is run when your dog is not completely focused on the scent or is on the verge of totally losing the trail. The dog will be working a trail, but is not really sure or displaying confidence in it. This type of trail is where you, the handler, will have to assist the dog. The trail requires you look at the lay of the land, wind direction, etc. It is important to do these things without hindering the dogs' movement, because he is moving strictly on instinct. Most handlers will find themselves not knowing or recognizing what is happening because the majority of trails they run are strictly following the dog. Watching your dog closely, you may notice him glancing numerous times like discussed in the head turn section. If you see the glance and have not seen any indications or movements of purpose in the immediate area, react to it. Cast into the glance and watch for more indications. You can also look at the lay of the land and with very little knowledge of scent, almost bet where the actual trail will be. Let the dog do

the work, your job is to keep the map in mind as to where you may need to go for complete recovery by remembering which areas we have eliminated.

## THE NEGATIVE ID

Our dogs are taught to tell when the scent we seek is not in the area. I accomplished the negative ID by rewarding my dogs for jumping on me when the scent is not in the area. It is a simple process of not allowing the dog to cast too far for the scent in the training process and enticing him to jump up on you when he has looked in all the directions within the area and has not lied to me or taken a direction of travel. My training area is approximately 40 ft every direction from the scent article. My dogs normally tell me in seconds now, if there is a trail leaving the area.

What is interesting about teaching this identification is I generally can tell if the scent has been in the area or not by the way my dog checks the area for a trail. For instance, when I work scenes where the subject has gotten into a vehicle and left the area, but their scent is in the area, my hound checks the area more thoroughly for the trail. When the person has never been in the area my dog checks quickly, usually with a swift circle or two, a couple turns of the head and then will give me a negative ID.

Some dogs will give this indication to you naturally when they have lost the trail and are confused. This technique is not going against any natural instinct the dog has. The important thing to look for, is a difference in the behavior of the dog when they jump up on you. To know if the dog has simply lost the trail, or the trail ends. When it is a definite end of trail, you will see confidence in their demeanor. If they have just lost the trail, you will notice the dog is hesitant to indicate. If you teach this negative ID to your dog, it is important to study their mannerism to understand which one they are saying; so you can react properly.

## THE CAST

When you have lost the trail and need to recover it casting your dog is an effective technique. During the training process when the dog has lost his focus and left the trail. We have stopped the dog and verbally corrected him then worked him back onto the trail by a circular motion rather than walking

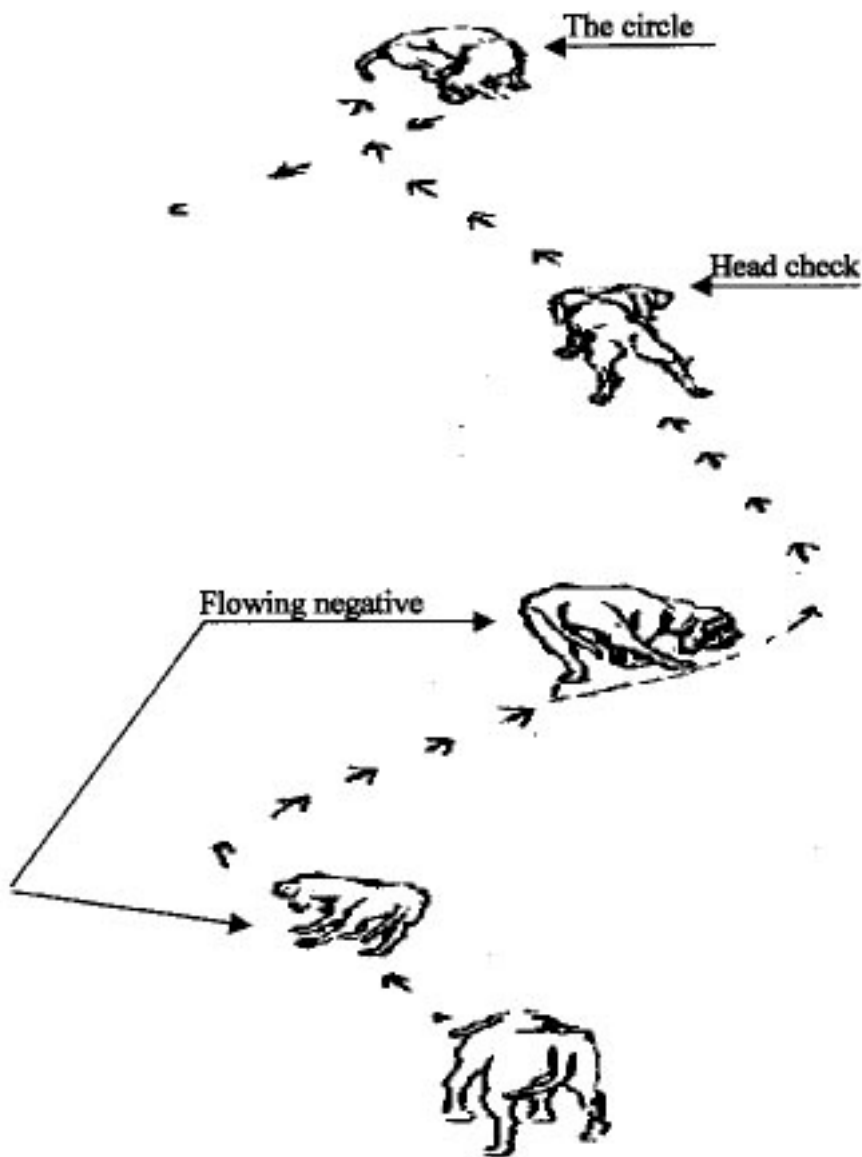
back to the trail. Hold firm on the lead and correct him if he gives any attempt to pull until you hit the area of the trail. Then, give praise when he takes the trail again. Example, you are out on a case running a trail and the dog indicates he has lost the trail. You have been keeping a running map in your mind of where you last saw the negative indications, and know you can head back to that area in hopes of recovering it. Before you do that, we have found it best to cast beyond the point the dog has indicated he lost the scent. Normally, it appears that something has happened to the scent at these points. If you cast the dog beyond that area, he normally will recover and finish the trail.

The important part of casting is to keep it a steady fluid motion, and to make sure you cover all avenues of escape. I have found keeping the lead somewhat taunt helps the dog stay true until you pass over the trail. What you are watching for is the dog to drop his head and commit to a direction of travel. When that happens you know you have recovered the trail. Until your dog gives that positive indication, you can take his non-committing as a negative indication that the trail did not go the directions you are covering with the cast. If you are working an intersection that the dog is having trouble with, use the four corners as your markers, cast the dog to each marker and watch for a reaction. If you do not see any reaction move on to the next marker, do not stand around waiting for one to appear.

The dogs' non-indication, was a negative indication the trail did not go there. The same principal applies in all terrains. A dog that has not been taught to hold true on a cast may do false bursts during the cast. When you see short trails during a cast followed by periods when the dog appears to be meandering around, not giving you movement of purpose, this is a good indication he has not held true for you. Go back to the area you were casting and finish covering the avenues of escape. When you have finished casting if he still has not picked up the trail, work the dog back towards your last negative indication while watching him for any head swings, head drops, and trail commitments that will indicate a recovery.

## PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This diagram below is putting some of the movements of purpose together to give you an idea of what a dog's trail might look like. You fill in what directions the dog has eliminated by showing you the negative indications. Some dogs may not have such exaggerated movements. However, all dogs eliminate directions of travel and are constantly giving information by showing movements of purpose while they trail.



## THE SHUT DOWN

**Y**OU have cast beyond the point your dog indicated he lost the trail, and back to the spot you saw the last negative indications and your dog has not reacted. He is not giving you anything, almost lethargic acting. This indicates he probably has quit working. The only chance you have at this point to regain enough drive to finish your job is to sit the dog down and motivate him. I have found that doing this during drive building training trails has been a great help. I will stop the dog in the middle of a training trail that he is showing a good drive and try to bring him to a different level of enthusiasm. When I am out working a trail and see he has shut down or getting close to shutting down. I am able to mimic what I did during the training process and bring enough of a burst out of him to finish a trail that would have other wise been lost. It is important to be ready to move when you do this so as not to hinder his movements, because he will be acting on instinct.

## SOLICITING AN ID ON A DOOR

**A**ny of you that have the opportunity to train with a Police K-9 unit will be familiar with the scent boxes; they use to train for building searches. For those of you that are not familiar with the scent boxes there is line of wooden boxes, one of which a subject gets in. The dog is then turned loose or worked down the boxes and learns to alert on the one with the person in it. Our unit has used self-storage units with the same success in our training. The trick is to teach the dog to use his nose and understand what we want. I fall right in with our patrol dogs doing this exercise. I first did it using no scent article and a different command from the one I use for trailing. I would sweep my hand along the bottom of each door almost like detailing a narcotics dog. It took a few passes before my dogs knew what game we were playing. When they caught on, I rewarded for each find. I was soon able to take this exercise to the last step and introduce the scent article.

I occasionally find a building with multiple doors and have a subject enter one. Then work my dog down them, watching him pass the unscented doors and jumping on the scented.

Even without doing this exercise, I have seen dogs close on a building with multiple doors, and after being taken to the doors and having the handler use his hand to focus the dog on the doors, indicate by showing interest in the



correct door. Here again, it is important when you don't see anything, to move on to the next while you still have the dogs focus on the search.

### WALKING ID

While training a bloodhound it is important to vary the position of the tracklayer at the end of the trail. This will help keep the hound from anticipating where the scent is leading them. One of the generally accepted harder endings to a trail is when the subject is walking. Most bloodhounds are taught the jump-up ID. The difficulty experienced by the hound with this finish comes from the uncertainty of jumping on a moving target. You can teach your hound to overcome this out of harness.

Get a treat and while walking slowly entice your dog to jump up for it. Every jump gets a reward and praise, building for the next time he jumps. Now do two short runaways using the harness and a scent article. One ends with the person walking towards the dog and one ends with the person walking away. Next do a scent article start and watch the dog apply the walking ID you have just taught him.

### THE FINAL CHAPTER

**W**e realize while writing this, there are going to be indications that we would not remember to place in this book, because we have come so accustomed to seeing and using them. If you watch your dog for the movements of purpose and begin to recognize them, we will have accomplished our goal, which was to make you a better handler with more confidence in your dog, which will inevitably lead to more success on the trail.

### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Robin and Kevin live in Spotsylvania, Virginia and run five Bloodhounds. Kevin is a Deputy and Bloodhound handler for the Spotsylvania Sheriff's Office. He was also a Bloodhound handler for the Washington D.C. Department of Corrections. Robin is also a Deputy and Bloodhound handler for the Spotsylvania Sheriff's Office. Both are founders of the National Bloodhound Training Institute