

Comparison of Scent Work, Obedience, Tracking and Field Retrieving

How is Scent Work different from the Obedience scent related exercises in UD/UDX or to Tracking and Track and Search?

Obedience and tracking handlers who have started training a dog in Scent Work have come to realise just how different it can be when compared to tracking and the obedience scent discrimination exercises.

In all these exercises and disciplines, the dog uses its sense of smell to solve the puzzles that we present them with. Dogs, trained correctly, can compete in all these disciplines at the same time, as the context presented to them is very different.

Scent Work involves four elements; containers, interiors, exteriors and vehicles; the context for each of these elements will typically vary significantly from trial to trial. In Obedience, the sights, sounds and formality of a trial ring provide a different context, as does tracking in the bush in a paddock or in suburban streets where, again, the context can vary significantly from trial to trial. Each of these contexts looks and feels very different to the dog.

OBEDIENCE

In the Obedience UD and UDX scent related exercises, the dog is required to differentiate between the scents of different humans on the scent articles. The pattern of the exercises is always the same (albeit with different placement of the articles/cloths). It is only the place where the trial or training takes place that changes significantly.

Scent Discrimination - UD Exercise:

The dog must select by scent and retrieve an article, which has been held by its handler (to impart scent) in each of the three tests (i.e. leather, metal and wood). The dog is required to select the article with its handler's scent from with the other twelve which hold the steward's scent.

Preparing the 'scent items' for these disciplines is relatively simple. The handler and steward are required to have contact with the items for a short period of time, usually seconds, before they are placed on the mat or ground (handler's choice).

The judge determines that the article returned to hand is either correct or incorrect.

There is no specific knowledge of scent dynamics required by the judge other than they must take care that cross-contamination of the articles does not occur.

Seek Back:

The article, with the handler's scent, is placed discreetly on the track by the judge or steward whilst the handler and dog are executing a heelwork pattern. In the UDX Seek Back exercise, a second article (handled by the steward) is placed on the track as a decoy. On direction of the judge, the handler sends their dog to find the article by scent (or, in the case of UD, potentially by sight), to pick it up and promptly return to the handler. The handler's scented article must not be touched by the judge or steward.

In this exercise the judge may take into consideration the direction of the wind but is limited by the ring parameters and typically the article is placed at a designated spot on the track of the dog and handler. The article (or, in UDX, the correct article) is either retrieved or it is not retrieved.

Scent Discrimination – Judge’s Scent – UDX exercise:

This exercise is carried out with the cloths placed on the ground.

There are ten cloths. Two are removed from a container using tongs for the judge to impart their scent onto the cloths. A steward places eight cloths on the ground by hand (to impart scent) in a pattern set by the judge. One cloth, scented by the judge, is placed in a designated spot amongst the other eight cloths. The other cloth, scented by the judge, is offered to the handler for the dog to take the scent. The dog is required to select the correct cloth with the judge’s scent from those with the steward’s scent.

The judge determines that the article returned to hand is either correct or incorrect.

There is no specific knowledge of scent dynamics required by the judge other than they must take care that cross-contamination of the articles does not occur. Again, the parameters of the ring provide little opportunity for judges to take account of wind or other environmental factors.

TRACKING/TRACK AND SEARCH

In both Tracking and Track and Search, the dog uses his natural ability to follow the scent trail of a specific person using both track and airborne scent to find the tracklayer at the end of the track. There are 8 levels in Tracking and 10 levels in Track and Search. Each level increases in complexity from the previous level.

Track 8 (Championship Track) is conducted in the country/bush over 1200 metres. There is no time limit if the dog is working. The dog is given the scent of the tracklayer and must follow the track after a 2-3 hour delay, ignoring all other scents and distractions. The dog must indicate to the handler several ‘lost’ articles which hold the tracklayer’s scent, and find the person at the end, where the dog is rewarded with food or a toy.

Track and Search 10 (Grand Championship track) is conducted in an urban area over 1200 metres at night. There is no time limit if the dog is working. The dog is given the scent of the tracklayer and must follow the track after a 4-5 hour delay, ignoring all other scent, contamination and distractions. The dog must continue to follow the track where the tracklayer was picked up in a car and set down 300 metres further down the track to continue walking to the end. The dog must find the tracklayer at the end of the track, where the dog is rewarded with food or a toy.

The judge sets the track in accordance with the track criteria (length, changes of direction, cross tracks, articles, time delay etc.) taking into account any environmental conditions that may affect the track scent. In judging the track, the judge is required to have a sound knowledge of the dynamics of scent in an external environment and once again take into account the effect of the conditions (weather, terrain, contamination etc.) on the track scent and interpret the dog’s body language and problem-solving skills in relation to the track.

FIELD RETRIEVING

In Field Retrieving, dogs use their natural hunting and air scenting ability to locate a bird or dummy (game) that is catapulted by a mechanical thrower into a paddock; the dog then gently delivers it to the hand of the handler. In the case of a ‘blind’, the game may be placed by someone in the field and the dog does not have the opportunity to see the game fall.

The retrieves may be over some very rough terrain, across rivers, creeks and dams and up and down steep embankments. Obedience forms part of this discipline in that the dog must always be under control, walk at heel and stay until released.

Once the dog is cued to retrieve, the dog must take direction from its handler, who may control their dog by whistle and/or hand/arm signals. The dog works at a considerable distance from the handler, ignoring distractions such as wildlife, stock and contamination by other dogs doing previous retrieves. The scent picture of the game may be complex as it could have been handled by multiple people prior to being 'thrown' or placed for the dog to retrieve.

Although the dog takes direction from the handler, when in close proximity to the game, the dog uses its natural scenting ability to locate it. It may have fallen in long grass, beside a log or in a gully/ditch.

The judge sets the runs a couple of days prior to the trial and tests them using an experienced dog. Dogs are required to retrieve in all weather and environmental conditions but, the judge does not take environmental conditions into consideration when setting out the retrieves. However, to assist the dog in air scenting, the handler may consider the wind direction and the effect of the terrain on the scent of the game, when setting up.

SCENT WORK

In Scent Work the dog searches for items scented with the odour of an approved range of essential oils (birch, anise, clove, cypress). Preparing these scent items and using them in practice and competition requires strict protocols:

- The correct scents must be sourced and stored appropriately – oil that has been exposed to heat or aged too long will degenerate and may not be located by dogs trained on that odour.
- Scent 'hides' must be prepared according to correct procedures. Certain materials such as plastics will react with essential oils, changing the chemical composition and consequently changing the 'odour' to one that trained dogs will not alert on.
- Items must be scented to the correct level – dogs are sensitive to both the types of odour they have been trained to find, and to the quantity of odour. Because of this the rules specify precise steps for preparing scent items. Failure to follow them can mean over- or under-scented items, which many trained dogs will not alert on.

Contamination

Scent Work involves the detection of very small quantities of scent in relatively small areas. This means that even very minute amounts of contamination in the search area can be problematic causing dogs to give 'false alerts' and fail to qualify.

When setting up a Scent Work search, it is extremely easy to contaminate the search area if scent items and/or oils are handled incorrectly. Simply touching a scent hide (for example to reposition it in a search if a competitor's dog has moved it) and then touching another item in the search area can cause later competitors' dogs to falsely alert on the contaminated area.

Both UD/UDX and Tracking also require safeguards against cross-contamination when handling articles. However, the extremely small levels of scent used in Scent Work mean that contamination can be a problem at much lower levels. Something as simple as placing prepared scent hides and

non-scented distraction items in the same car to transport to a Scent Work trial could result in the distraction items being contaminated.

Scent Dynamics

The four elements of Scent Work (indoor, outdoor, vehicle and container searches) take place in very different environments, each requiring a precise understanding of scent dynamics in order for the judge to understand exactly how challenging or simple the planned search may be.

Vehicle Search: A dog must search a number of vehicles to identify the location of the scent hide. The construction and arrangement of the vehicles means that scent moves under the vehicle, up through vents in the chassis, through the wheel arches etc, and it takes experience and a sound understanding of scent dynamics to predict where the scent may travel.

Exterior Search: While both Tracking and Scent Work exterior searches take place in outdoor environments, the types of search are very different. A scent work exterior search is for a **tiny** quantity of scent in a relatively small environment. As well as being impacted by the factors that impact on tracking or track and search (such as humidity, wind direction, buildings, fences, vegetation etc.), an outdoor Scent Work search can be impacted by very small objects and by very small variations in conditions such as the placement of a seat or a garden hose, a large rock in the area that is warming in the sun. A Scent Work judge needs to understand both the macro and the micro patterns of scent dynamics.

Indoor Search: Indoor searches take place in an extremely complex scent environment. Temperature differentials, draughts created by openings in the walls, doorways, staircases, air vents etc, as well as objects within the room, all influence the movement and diffusion of scent within the indoor environment. This requires understanding and management by the judge, both in setting the search and in ensuring that all competitors have an approximately similar search environment. For example, something as simple as opening a window or door in an adjoining room will significantly change the pattern of scent movement in the search room.

Container Search: Container searches can be conducted indoor or outdoor and the scent dynamics for the respective environments mentioned above can apply equally to container searches.

Converging odour

In the Advanced, Excellent and Masters levels, a dog searches for multiple scent hides. The placement of these hides can create situations of 'converging odour' - a challenging situation where the scent pools from two items some distance apart meet, and the dog must decipher the scent picture to find first one and then another item.

The circumstances where odour will converge vary, depending on a range of factors including temperature, humidity, air currents, and placement of the hides. For the judge or Scent Work trainer, it's essential to understand all the potential impacts on scent movement; they must then determine when it is appropriate to intentionally create converging odour challenges and understand how to do so.

COMPLEMENTARITY OF THE DISCIPLINES

Although each of the disciplines has distinctive requirements in terms of training, trialling and judging, nevertheless they are complementary in that they all involve the dog using its olfactory senses to perform the task. Development of those senses in one discipline complements and strengthens their application in another discipline.

Our dogs are very adept in understanding different contexts, and applying their skills and senses to the context in which they are working, so handlers need not be concerned that training and trialling their dog in Scent Work will detract from their ability to perform the scent exercises in UD and UDX, or their ability to track a 'lost person' in Tracking or Track and Search.