

TRAINING DISTRACTIONS IN NOSEWORK

This lesson will explain why you should train distractions in scent detection. We'll explain how to select appropriate distractions and rewards for your unique dog, how to plan and evaluate training sessions, and when and how to progress to minimize errors and maximize motivation.

*The most important thing is how you reward!
Always reward the dog for finding source. Then
give additional rewards for lying down OR nose
at source. Jackpot when your dog does both.*

WHY TRAIN DISTRACTIONS?

Errorless Learning

Years ago, scientists wondered whether errors were required for learning, or whether learning could occur in the absence of errors. Terrace demonstrated that pigeons learning color discrimination had fewer errors, before, during and AFTER LEARNING when they used an errorless learning strategy (Discrimination Learning with and without "errors", Journal of the Experimental Analysis of Behavior, Vol. 6, No. 1, Jan. 1963). Errors were not required for learning, and when present they did not improve learning either.

In Excel-erated Learning, Explaining in plain English how dogs learn and how best to teach them (page 92), Pamela Reid explains how to most effectively teach canine scent detection by utilizing errorless learning.

When the trainer offers a right choice (a "hot" box with odor) and a wrong choice (a "cold" box without odor) that are equally attractive, dogs learn by trial and error, which choice is correct, based on which choice is rewarded. But you can expect many errors, before, during and after learning.

In contrast, an "errorless" approach, the trainer would offer a hot box close to the dog and reward the dog for touching it. The behavior would be repeated. Next a cold box would be introduced so far away that it is unlikely to be noticed by the dog. The dog often continued to touch the hot box without making any error. The cold box would be gradually moved closer, making it more likely the dog might notice it and make an error

by touching it, which would not be rewarded. Eventually the boxes would be in close proximity, when they would be equally attractive. Not only did dogs using this technique learn scent discrimination, but they made fewer errors before, during and after learning when compared to trial and error.

Therefore, to minimize errors by scent detection dogs, it's best to start by offering distractions (wrong choices) far away, so that they are unattractive, and then gradually move them closer to the right choice. Start distraction training with easy, lower value distractions, so the dog learns with as few errors as possible, before increasing the difficulty by offering medium value distractions. Save the most challenging distractions for last. It's in your power to control the environment for better odds of success and fewer errors!

Expect Distractions in Nosework Competition

In the beginning levels of nosework competition, odor will be present in a box, and there should be no intentional distractions. But in real life, there are always distractions for the dogs, including:

- a busy, novel trial location, sights and sounds
- strange new boxes that the dog may not even recognize as containers e.g. heart shaped box
- hides prepared by new people
- dogs nearby releasing pheromones that communicate everything from excitement to fear
- dogs that previously urinated in the area, etc.

In the higher levels of nosework competition, the judge is required to place intentional distractions in the search environment, so to pass, your dog needs to be able to work when distractions are present. For example, in Elite UKC Vehicle Searches, the handlers don't know the number of hides present (there are 3 or 4), and 3 distractions. Most judges make the distractions inaccessible, to prevent dogs from self-rewarding. Expect any food or toy distractions. For example, the judge can put roast beef in a ventilated metal tin (that has no odor) and secure that inside the muffler.

Dogs are not faulted for noticing any distraction, but it wastes time. For example, in K9 ABC Games Triple Odor Games, one judge put the target odor on a stuffed duck toy. My dog picked it up and carried around until he found the next hide, then dropped it. That performance, while not ideal, passed to earn the title and was not faulted. As it happens,

that was the hardest possible distraction for my dog, since he carries a stuffed animal around as his reward for finishing all the searches!

Default Behavior

Note in nosework competition, the dogs need to leave food and toy distractions in the search environment, to find the target odor, under time pressure. If the dog eats food on the floor or picks up the toy, the dog should not be faulted. The dog is allowed to notice the distraction, which they are likely to smell if they thoroughly search the area.

Many handlers train a "leave it" command, but we prefer not to rely on verbals. In my opinion, the ideal performance would be a dog that is so highly motivated by odor that he passes up an open bag of food to find target odor. This should be a default behavior, because the handler won't know the location of the distractions in blind searches. You don't want to have to say a verbal cue or command "leave it", but rather, it should be the dog's job to notice distractions and keep on working. This process of training reliable performance with distractions takes a long time, and lots of effort, but it's a lot more fun when you can trust your dog and count on success. As long as you don't give up and you don't push your dog too hard, you can treat it as a fun game, and celebrate the successes along the way.

WHEN TO TRAIN DISTRACTIONS

Work One Thing at a Time

When working distractions, that should be the only challenge present. You're offering your dog a simple choice to focus on the distraction or start searching. Set up your search to be fast and easy, so the dog quickly succeeds. Mark the instant of success (with a click or verbal "yes"), then have a huge party.

Don't use distractions that can scare or hurt the dog. Work on fear and reactivity issues separately from nosework.

Prerequisites for Training Distractions

You need to establish and grow your dog's perceived value for odor recognition, searching and finding, before you test the value. Each challenge you select should be hard enough so that he tries harder, but is able to succeed. Your dog should be happy and continue to searching in the face of increased challenge that causes rewards to be delayed. The dog should not shut down and leave source. If you usually train off leash,

this may be a good time to put the dog on leash and step on it so he can't quit, opt out and leave the training area.

Comfort in Crazy-Making Environments

Some environments are so distracting, dogs seem to forget all their training and lose their brain.

When you go to a distracting new environment with your dog, do and say nothing and wait. The length of time it takes for him to acknowledge you reflects how distracted he is. Don't work harder to make your dog pay attention, that's the dog's job. Your job is to control the environment to gradually and progressively introduce distractions in training, so that your dog can succeed. If your dog has a meltdown, you went too far too fast. Reset and make it easier. Think of how to break it down into smaller steps.

If your plan was to train 2 boxes with squeaky toy distractions, but the dog won't pay attention to you or your rewards when you enter the environment, adjust your plan. Don't just forge ahead and get angry with your dog for failing. Instead, spend time allowing your dog to get accustomed to that environment, reward and then leave to take the pressure off so you can play. You can come back again, and progress gradually to the squeaky toy there.

All detection dogs need to learn to work through distractions in a stepwise fashion, including police K9's, military explosives detection dogs and working scent detection teams. Don't forget that you need to train your dog, then test them, in order to be able to trust the performance. Don't get angry, since it's not helpful. In the learning stage, you set your dog up for success. In the testing stage, you set your dog up to fail (while still making the challenge achievable). When you notice your dog making mistakes, that indicates a hole in your training. That's helpful information that you can fix. Go back and make a plan how to gradually improve the weak area.

Don't constantly raise the bar, making every session more difficult. Do a bit of cross-training, alternating with motivational sessions in distraction free environments. If you work distractions Monday, your Tuesday session could focus on your handling skills, decreasing the delay between when the dog finds source and when you deliver the reward. Then Wednesday, you could work thresholds, and Thursday offer a distance challenge on the table, without odor. Vary the type and level of challenges so the dog never knows what to expect, succeeds often, and always looks forward to training.

It's Your Choice Games

Before we consider training distractions in nosework, we teach the default behavior of leaving food and toy distractions away from nosework and odors. This is a very useful skill that helps throughout your dog's training, since the dog learns that when he sees food or toy that he wants, he can earn it by performing the target behavior.

1. Game 1 is ignoring food in the handler's open palm
2. Game 2 is ignoring food on the floor
3. Game 3 combines the 2 earlier its your choice games with odor. (Only do this with a dog that has a solid search and find it.) Present a hot box in one hand and a reward in your opposite hand. When the dog chooses to put his nose at to source, click and move the hand holding the reward to deliver at source while you say "get it"



Structure Every Training Session

As always, every training session should be structured as follows:

1. An easy warmup
2. ONE appropriate challenge
3. Fast, fun cooldown
4. Reward event

Be a Splitter, Not a Lumper

To succeed in dog training, be a splitter not a lumper. When you're working on distractions, focus on distractions only. You MUST use a known hide location, not a blind search. If your dog has trouble with distractions and a 1 box search, adding 11 more boxes won't help. Do not follow distractions with a long, hard search, and then lump in duration of the indication.

When your dog succeeds at every component independently, then you can add them together. Be patient in the meantime, and go at your dog's speed. Celebrate all of your successes and you'll have a far more motivated partner.

HOW TO TRAIN DISTRACTIONS

Rewards Are the Most Important Thing

If you only learn one thing from this course, the most important thing is to always reward the dog for finding it. The most frequent mistake I see in indication training is when handlers ignore it when the dog finds source. They wait and hope for something else. Their dog leaves or offers undesirable behaviors such as digging, biting, and leaving source. It is confusing and demotivational. This problem is prevented by rewarding the find it, and continuing to follow up with several more rewards for indicating.

Always reward the dog for finding source! If you don't, you risk losing the motivation to search and find.

While training an indication, don't push your dog. Reward lying down OR nose at source. Jackpot when your dog is lying down with his nose pressed into source. Over repetitions, the indication will improve.

Continue to deliver a random number of rewards at source, so the dog doesn't know what to expect. Having said that, if you deliver 10 rewards, the dog is more likely to just lie down. Over many repetitions, you'll notice the dog thinks less and lies down faster. That's when you can really cement the indication in your dog's mind.

Always reward the dog for finding source! Relax your expectations on the indication, and jackpot when the dog lies down and places his nose at source.

Distraction Training Goals

To train reliable scent detection performance, your dog needs to become accustomed to ignoring food and toy distractions in the environment. The most likely method to succeed is to start by training easy distractions that the dog barely notices, and gradually increase the level of challenge.

Eventually, we like to "train harder than we trial". So, we set high goals and train for all the distractions we can imagine, except for what could hurt or scare the dog. Then we feel well prepared, and competitions are fun and easy.

We'll show you how.

Observe Distracted Sniffing vs. Sourcing

Students often ask how they can tell the difference between when their dog is sniffing distractions versus when they're in odor. It's important to be able to:

- read your dog's body language, and
- train your dog to ignore distractions to get to odor.

Reading your dog takes practice, and every dog is different. By observing your dog's behavior on distractions when odor is absent, you'll start to develop your skills as a handler.

Set up a 10x10 feet area, without any odors, and take video if you can. Place various food and toy distractions in the area and watch your dog's body when he's sniffing the distractions.

Usually dogs have very different body language when "being doggy" and sniffing distractions. For example, my dog's tail freezes when he indicates with focused attention, he stands tall and rigid, and his breath slows or even pauses for a few seconds. In comparison, while sniffing distractions, his body language is more relaxed, he's not audibly sniffing, his tail wags slowly, and his body continues moves continuously. Sometimes when he finds a distraction, he exhales with a sharp, loud, audible snort. That sound doesn't occur when he is in odor (when you can hear his sniffing). Once you know some "tells" or clues that are characteristics of your dog when he's distracted, and you've trained a reliable indication separately, it's fairly easy to tell the difference between sniffing distraction and a change of behavior when the dog encounters odor.

Omit this step at your peril. The key to accelerated learning is comparing known distractors with searches when you know the location of the hide. Never forget that blind searches work on the handler and known searches work on the dog. Learn about body language and train your dog first, and then you can take that knowledge with you into blind searches later to work on your handling.

YOUR UNIQUE DOG

Create a Custom Distraction Training Plan

What the steps look like in distraction training depend on the preferences of YOUR unique dog.

Each individual dog has his own unique hierarchy of distractions. The dog's greatest reward is likely a very challenging distraction. For example, if my dog's favorite toy (plush duck toy) is placed in his path in front of the containers to be searched, and he has to ignore what he really wants, that is a huge distraction. In comparison, ignoring dry kibble in an unventilated transparent box, or just a strange box without odor, are far easier.

It's important not to train for other dogs' preferences, but to create a list for your dog's preferences today. This list will help you to create a plan for your dog's nosework training. The list can change at different life stages, but today you should be training the dog you have, not the one you had in the past or the one you want in the future.

Distractions Are a Drive Problem

When a dog is distracted, that's essentially a drive problem. The dog is telling you that the distraction is more attractive than searching for odor. So, you need to develop a plan of how to control the environment and gradually introduce more appealing distractions, while making it likely that your dog can succeed, and earn even greater rewards.

Value: What's It Worth to You?

The relative value of various rewards is determined entirely by the recipient. In a fun post, Susan Garrett likened value to finding money:

"How many people reading this, if you were walking to their car with your arms full holding grocery bags and saw a single penny on the ground would go to the effort of bending down to see if it was really only a penny or possibly something more? I would guess less than 1% of us would bother checking out the penny (perhaps the odd person that had superstitious reason for doing it), but from a "relative value to you" point of view, it is very likely we all would just keep walking with your arms full of groceries.

Now what if your arms were still full holding groceries and you saw a roll of \$100 bills lying in the street? Would you then go to the effort of adjusting your load so you could pick that up? I would think the vast majority of us would do so, possibly 99.9%? Even if you were a billionaire and the roll of hundreds were "chump change" to you, you would still likely pick it up. Why? Because even if you are wealthy money would carry great value (<http://susangarrettdogagility.com/2011/01/respecting-the-value/>, downloaded Feb. 28, 2017)".

When you start training a new behavior, use high value rewards (like \$100 bills) to build drive and motivation for the behavior. If you use uninteresting rewards (like pennies or monopoly money) that hold no value for the recipient, the work is not as appealing.

Once you've built the value, the next stage is to test the value. It's time to make it harder, to test the strength of the behavior by working through distractions in your training, and rewarding with even higher value rewards. If you introduce the distractions too early, before the dog has the positive association, it will be demotivational and confusing. So, the art of training is knowing when to make things easy, and when you do make them harder, to do so in small, achievable steps, without sacrificing motivation. Knowing the magnitude of distractions and the value of rewards is critical. (And of course, timing, reward placement, and controlling the environment continue to be building blocks for success.)

Uncover Your Dog's Hierarchy of Distractions

Before you train your dog again, envision the most fun your dog has ever had. Picture a time when he ran the fastest you ever saw him. Was he chasing a rabbit? Or was he salivating and apparently lost his mind obsessed over tripe? Are sticks his favorite thing? Would the distraction you'd hate most to encounter be squeaking toys?



The highest value items are like a double-edged sword: they can act as the greatest reward, and the most challenging distraction.

Here's my list of distractions for my dog, Boo:

BOO'S DISTRACTIONS			
Dog's name:		Date:	
Extremely challenging distractions (would always cause dog to fail)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Stuffed duck toy • <u>Thrown</u> lotus ball (stuffable jackpot toy) • Me playing with another one of my dogs • Me releasing another one of my dogs run from the car to the off-leash park 		
Difficult distractions that (would cause the	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Weiner held in hand of a stranger • <u>Rolled</u> lotus ball • Other dog in animated excited play session with their toy 		

<p>dog to fail sometimes)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Venison on the path he must run over to search objects • Rabbit tug toy held in my hand, jerking about erratically
<p>Medium difficulty distractions (dog would notice but get back to work with time and/or encouragement)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <u>Dropped</u> lotus ball • Tennis ball • Kong • Chicken, wieners, cheese • Multiple crinkled sheets of paper • Creek, pool, or water source on a hot day • Dead bird • His open crate door, when his stuffed toy is waiting inside • Tug toy on the ground • Gunfire nearby • Waiting his turn in a crate in the room where other dogs are searching • Waiting in his crate in my car until he's released to run to the off-leash park first (before the other dogs) • Strange new handler holding leash, cuing to search, and rewarding him • Bunnies or birds running by the search area • Other animals' urine/feces in search area
<p>Easy distractions (dog would hardly notice, if at all)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Imitation crab meat • Empty lotus ball held <u>stationary in my hand</u> • Hotdog in person's hand at start line • Sticks • Moving leaves • Light shining • Children running by • Dead mouse • One of my other dogs in a crate at the side of the search area • Hard toys inside a clear box on the start line • Lightning • Waiting in my car while strange dogs are working • Handler or other people standing inside a small area he needs to search and exerting social pressure • Automobile traffic, trains, planes • Other handlers' cues • Empty bag of cat food in search area • Box or container of other dogs' toys

Now begin writing your list of distractions for your dog. What's an easy distraction, that your dog will hardly notice, and would pay little attention then get to work? Then fill in the most difficult distraction you can imagine. And finally, complete the medium difficulty distractions, which will fill out your list, in between the two extremes.

Don't forget to include objects and conditions which you may encounter in searching containers, interiors, exteriors and vehicles in nosework competition, as well as environmental stressors before, during and after an outing. For example, while your dog waits in your vehicle for his turn to search, will he be repeatedly spinning and whining? If the ground is soaked by a sudden rain or there's snow on the ground in an exterior search, will your dog still lie down to indicate source?

If you put a crumpled piece of paper on the floor, dogs that are visually stimulated will find that item distracting. If you put a wiener on the floor, that's probably even harder. For some dogs, seeing the flash of a watch reflecting sun or the flash from a photographer cause intense focus on the distraction, and inability to work. When distractions happen (during training or competing), wait to give your cue until your dog has recovered and is ready to work, so you set your dog up for success. Time doesn't start until you say your cue, or you or your dog cross the start line, so take your time!

For reactive dogs, be calm so your dog is calm. Arrive early so your dog can see and hear and experience the environment and get it out of his system. If any family members or friends attend to watch you and your dog, be sure the dog meets them before your run. Surprising the dog during a run with the appearance of her favorite person is a recipe for trouble. The gold standard in training would be to recognize the presence of that person as a distraction and work through it systematically in practice. Start easy, with that person standing frozen and silent farther away and gradually getting closer behaving in a goofy, animated way that incites exciting play. Similarly, familiar dogs in the environment can be a huge distraction. Control the environment so you can train appropriate levels of challenge and set your dog up for success.

Once you've completed your dog's list of distractions, use them to fill in the blanks on this form, as appropriate for your dog.

'S DISTRACTIONS	
Dog's name:	Date:
Extremely challenging distractions (would always cause dog to fail)	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
Difficult distractions that (would sometimes cause the dog to fail)	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
Medium difficulty distractions (dog would notice but get back to work with time and/or encouragement)	1
	2
	3
	4
	5
Easy distractions (dog would hardly notice, or completely ignore)	1
	2
	3
	4
	5

Rank Your Dog's Favorite Rewards

So far, you've itemized distractions that may negatively impact your dog's searches. Next, you need to figure out reward incentives you could offer your dog to make searching and finding odor so motivating, he'd be more likely to ignore some of the distractions. What are all the rewards you could offer as reinforcement in training? Include foods, toys and activities (aka life rewards, such as going to play fetch at the park).

It's important to understand what your dog finds rewarding and when that reward is best. For example, if your dog loves to swim, going to the creek after a training session on a sunny day can be a fantastic reward. But if it's -10°C in a blizzard, then falling through the ice wouldn't have the same level of attractiveness.

Similarly, Boo likes snuggling after we get home for training at the barn and have eaten our dinners. If I tried to offer snuggling during his searches, he would prefer to search and my touch would become mildly aversive in comparison.

Also, the value of food rewards is dependent on satiety. When you’re very hungry, food becomes very enticing. But after you ate a holiday meal of 12 courses, even desert may not seem as attractive. Saying “my dog loves food” is too vague. Instead, specify foods your dog is crazy about e.g. hamburger, and foods he may take or spit out e.g. lettuce (low value).

Upon completing your dog’s list of rewards, assign each reward a letter according to how much the dog loves it. We’ll use letters to rank the rewards and create a hierarchy, as follows:

- A. Rewards your dog is crazy about. He loves these, and wants them any time, any place

Use A+ for 1-2 things that are your dog’s absolute favorites. A+ rewards are so great, the dog may seem to lose his brain around, and it would be difficult for him to focus on training. But he loves them so much, using these rewards is worth the effort!

- B. Rewards he enjoys. He’ll take these most of the time
- C. Rewards he’s interested in taking sometimes
- D. Rewards he’s rarely interested in.
- E. Things your dog doesn’t want at any time.

Here’s a sample table for my dog Boo:

BOO’S REWARDS					
A+ Crazy Favorites	A Loves	B Enjoys	C Shows interest sometimes	D Rarely Shows interest	E Not interested in
Plush bird toy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Thrown lotus ball (jackpot toy stuffed with venison) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dropped lotus ball, stuffed with wieners • Whole wiener held in hand, offered by saying “get it” 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A bowl of dry dog food on the floor • Swimming on a hot day • Chew toy such as Kong 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Crinkled papers on the floor • Small spilled pieces of food on the floor • Closed Rubbermaid storage container 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Golf balls • Milker • Firehose • Rope toy • Plastic duck • Antler • Nylabone • Seeing the dogs of Carla’s training partners

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Going for an off leash walk in the country, in any weather • Bully stick • Meeting new people 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Running to his open crate • Other dogs we live with, when present on course 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • holding food • Seeing Carla's training partners • Escaping from the yard to go on a run by himself 	
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Every dog is different. For example, some dogs love snuggles, and others shrink away so you have to work on counter conditioning them to accept. While teaching your dog to accept touching is a useful exercise, snuggling wouldn't be rewarding for that dog today.

Review and consider all of the items and activities you might be able to incorporate into your training, and specify when they'd be useful as rewards, and when they wouldn't.

Now use your notes to record your dog's reward hierarchy, as of today.

'S REWARDS					
A+ Crazy Favorites	A Loves	B Enjoys	C Shows interest sometimes	D Rarely Shows interest	E Not interested in
1	1	1	1	1	1
2	2	2	2	2	2
3	3	3	3	3	3
4	4	4	4	4	4
5	5	5	5	5	5
	6	6	6	6	6
	7	7	7	7	7
	8	8	8	8	8
	9	9	9	9	9
	10	10	10	10	10

Balance Distractions with Rewards

The more challenging the distraction, the higher the value rewards you should use to make it worthwhile for your dog to make the correct choice. For example, if you are in a

new environment with loud, frantic activity, unusual boxes, strange dogs and toys lying willy nilly around the search environment, the dry dog kibble you use to train at home will probably be insufficient to even get your dog's attention. Plan to bring high value rewards with you so you can upgrade the incentive to a better than usual reward such as rotisserie chicken breast or whole wieners. Having more rewards gives you more options.

Progressing the Presentation of A Distraction

Only the handler can control the environment, which is a major factor in whether dog succeeds. For a given food or toy distraction, you can play with its attractiveness by modifying its presentation as follows:

- Start easy. The distraction should be inaccessible, but clearly visible on the start line, a few feet away from the single hot box. For example, I put punch holes in a container of Caesar moist dog food, then put it in an open Ziploc bag, then place that in a shopping bag I've tied the top of, and place it on the start line. (To stay safe, you have to be fairly confident the dog won't just swallow the entire assembly. Don't leave your dog unattended with hides or with distractions.)
- Then increase the ventilation by inserting the distraction into a metal suet container (so the dog can smell the distraction but can't self-reward). If there is any possibility that the dog might consume the distraction very quickly, you need to make it safe to train, again by preventing self-rewarding.
- Change the picture by placing the distractor inside a box where it is not visible. Dogs sometimes react differently to concealed distractions vs. easy visible distractions.
- Then make the distraction more accessible, by holding it in your open palm. (Simply close your hand if he tries to steal, then offer him the choice again.)
- Finally, place the distraction on the floor, under your foot. (Most dogs hesitate to steal food out of a human's hand, but once it's on the floor, dogs are far more likely to try to steal it.)
- If you want a challenge, the most difficult presentation would be leaving the item free and easily accessible on the floor. Maintain a fun attitude and notice when your dog improves.

Once you're happy with your dog's performance with that distraction, plan your next training session with another, higher value distraction and work through the same progression using 1 hot box.

Uber Challenging Distractions

When working with your dog's most challenging distractions, the work can be stressful. Use A+ (the highest value) rewards, to make it worth your dog's while, so he leaves the

distraction to search for odor. Don't expect perfection immediately. Do recognize small incremental improvements, and reward highly.

Research suggests dogs can tell the difference between nonsense words and sincere praise. Don't dispassionately deliver food and toy rewards at source, but rather, praise your dog by telling him honestly what a great job he did.

Introduce the dog's most challenging distraction far away, in another room. Move it closer, gradually, as long as the dog is successful. For example, if the dog is distracted by a squeaky toy, start with 1 squeak by volunteer 50 feet away, in another room. Then stop the distraction and hopefully the dog will recover and start to search. Do not repeat your search cue! If the dog succeeds, move the distraction to 40 feet.

Add the Second Box

Once you've worked through most of the distractions on 1 box, then you can try adding a second box, as long as your dog continues to progress in the confidence, reliability and speed of his indication.

Gradually add boxes one at a time. When you have 12 boxes in a row, you're ready to try a pre-trial/DOT/ORT or novice container search.

MONITORING PROGRESS

Do You Need to Reevaluate?

Training can be surprising, when distractions like steak are passed up by dogs who dive in to try to steal a crust of bread in garbage strewn on the floor of the search. Over time, try to train all food, toy, noise and life reward distractions you might encounter in trials. Eventually, you would be wise to train in exterior environments where other dogs have urinated and defecated, and where there are prey smells and scat from other animals. But if a beginner dog can't ignore dried food in the handler's vest or celery in a lunch bag, then that challenge might be more useful to save for a future time when the dog is more ready.

Monitor Your Rate of Reinforcement

Your rate of reinforcement can tell you a lot about the success of your training sessions. Video your sessions and compare how long the dog works with how many rewards he received. If the dog received 30 rewards in a 2-minute session, that session was highly rewarding and motivational. But if the dog searched for 10 minutes and only received 2

rewards, that session was likely demotivating. Bring things into balance by adjusting your training so your dog's next session is based on having fun together.

Don't Be Cheap!

To succeed, the value of the reward you deliver should be higher than the value of the distraction. Don't be cheap with your rewards! When your dog has a breakthrough performance, you need to notice and celebrate in a way that your dog loves. Watch for upright body posture, ears erect, spinning, barking, and seeing the whites of his eyes may be part of the picture of your dog's delighted excitement. We are training for drive, motivation and independent obedience to odor. During searches, do not focus on obedience to the handler. If your dog is squealing, don't squelch that enthusiasm.

Last, But Most Important

In conclusion, the most important thing is to reward the dog for finding source. If you don't reward the dog for finding it, you are on the path to losing it.

Reward lying down OR nose at source. Deliver several subsequent rewards to increase the likelihood your dog will lie down. Jackpot when the dog lies down AND presses his nose to source. Repeat until your dog indicates without thinking and success is a habit.

Stuck? Questions are always welcome. Let us know how your training is progressing.