

FIELD TRIAL TRAINING WITH MINIATURES

BY KARLA MARTIN

As I write this, it is January. Already I have field trials on my mind. Now, in the winter, is a great time to start pups, or older dogs, for the field trials. My favorite time is mid to late morning, after there has been a dusting of snow, if you are lucky.

For the dog's first forays into the field, I prefer to carry her out so she isn't disturbed by other scents such as moles, chipmunks, squirrels, etc. I walk until I find fresh tracks in the snow, then I put the dog down on the line. As I put her down, I will pat the ground by the tracks and say, "Find it". As the dog puts her nose down in the first track, I quietly say, "Good. Find it." If the dog doesn't move on to the next track, I point at it and again say, "Find it." Once the dog is following the trail, track by track, I try to stay as quiet as possible so I don't distract the dog. When the dog comes to a check, i.e., a place where the rabbit turned, I stop to see what the dog will do.

If the dog looks like she is going to run riot (run off wildly) I will call her back immediately to the last track she had and tell her, "Find it." Then I will point out the next track, again saying, "Find it." Usually the dog will then continue on her own again.

If the dog stays calmly working near the last track where the rabbit turned, leave her alone! She is doing exactly what you want her to do. That is, work slowly out from the last track searching for the new direction. When she finds that next track, I say very quietly, "Good. Good girl." Then again let her work on her own.

Since I prefer to work with a slightly submissive dog, I stay fairly close to the dog as she works. I also do earth work with my dogs and they are taught to hunt WITH me. So on rabbit, I stay fairly close until the dog's confidence is high. This can take 2 or 3 rabbits with one dog or 2 or 3 months with another. You can gradually build the distance between you and the dog as she progresses in her work. The submissive dog will gain a great deal of confidence with the field work yet is easy to control with simple obedience commands.

If your dog is one that runs riot at her first checks, stay fairly close until she begins to settle on her checkwork more. Bad habits are very difficult to undo. It is easier to keep them from ever starting.

With rabbit work, let the dog tell you where the rabbit went unless you saw it or have tracks in the snow to follow. The dog has a much better nose on rabbit than you!

You will notice I never said to let the dog SEE the rabbits run. I used to recommend that the dog get to see a few rabbits. But I believe our breed is too apt to become "lookers" at a tough check and lift their head instead of concentrating on the track. So I no longer recommend the dog be allowed to "watch" rabbits. This will only encourage sight chasing, and there is nothing harder to break in a rabbit dog. A dog does not have to see or eat a rabbit to follow its scent. Our minis are natural trackers. Just point out to them what you want them to track and let them have at it.

HINT: By saying, "Find it." instead of Tally-ho as they do at field trials, you will be sure to have a calm dog to put on the rabbit when it is her turn. Tracking is a quiet, exacting, mental sport for the dog. A dog who is screaming as she comes up to the line is not concentrating and is certainly not exhibiting the patience required to work out the twisting turns of a rabbit. You are also teaching your dog that "Find it." means to put your nose down and find it by scent --a necessity if you are going to do any TD or IHD work with the dog.