

How do I train for a Fur Tracking Test?

If you're interested in entering your dog in an HWA Fur Test, some easy training will pay off. Your dog starts with instincts, but training involves encouraging him to keep nose to ground and follow the track of a specific scent. Tracking varmints is a traditional Airedale hunting skill, and so it's an important part of our HWA Versatile test program. You can also develop your dog's tracking skills to participate in AKC Tracking Tests, IPO (Schutzhund-type) working dog tracking tests, or even search-and-rescue work.

So how to start tracking training?

Some trainers start puppies or very novice dogs with an easy lesson on following a step-by-step track of hot dog pieces. Just chop up some hot dogs. Going outdoors, drop pieces of hot dog in a straight line, spacing them about 12-18" apart. At the end of the track, drop a bigger "prize" piece or a pile of several pieces.

Then just start your pup at the first piece and encourage him to follow his nose to the next piece, and forward down the track until the jackpot. This simple exercise teaches the pup to keep nose to the ground while moving along a track to the reward.

Next sessions with hot dogs might involve spacing the hot dogs farther apart, making longer tracks, and putting some turns into the straight track. You could also try a hot-dog drag, in which you put a string on that hot dog, drag it along the ground, and see if your pup can follow that scent without being rewarded by tidbits of hot dog along the way. Of course, don't forget the reward piece at the end!

Some trainers suggest that using food as a tracking training tool should be done for a short time only, since animal-scent is the name of the game. In fact, those who have a dog with a good nose and high prey drive will skip the hot dog training and start with raccoon scent.

You can purchase prepared raccoon scent online through sites such as www.fntpost.com -- see their Dog Training Supplies section, or through other sources to be found simply by googling



"raccoon scent." For many years, Boatman Raccoon scent was the preferred scent used by HWA, but as that business has closed, other brands will be used. Some folks who do a lot of tracking training purchase scent drags, humane "have-a-heart traps," and roll cages.

But for simple starter lessons, we'll work with some purchased raccoon scent, a bucket with water to dilute the scent, an old dishtowel tied to a rope for a drag.



We lay a trail by dragging the scent along a path we've marked with ribbons or markers (so that humans know where the track is). Start with a short, straight track. Later, add turns and distance. Be careful not to step on the track you lay.

Your dog follows the trail you've laid, nose to ground. You can keep the dog leashed or on a long training line for early lessons. Later,

the dog should be able to track off leash, independently of the handler. During the test, a handler isn't allowed to coach or correct the dog, so the try for a minimal amount of "helping" your dog even in the early lessons.



Every track needs a reward at the end point, and in raccoon tracking, the prize will be finding a caged raccoon up in a tree. For getting-started lessons, you can use a big stuffed toy hung up in the tree. Its important that the dog learns to look UP for his prize and be so excited that he jumps around and barks at it. So pick a toy he likes, encourage him to bark and jump for it, then reward him by letting him get that toy in his mouth to "kill" it.

For more realistic effect, use a toy stuffed raccoon or buy a raccoon pelt (available online). You can suspend the pelt or toy in a wire trap, birdcage, or purchase a roll case to make the practice sessions more test-like.

Unlike coonhounds, who are born to bay, some Airedales are silent hunters. Since the Airedales are required to bark to pass their Fur

Test, many owners develop their dogs' barking habits by hanging a scented rag on the cage. The first time the dog barks at the cage, he's rewarded with a game of keep-away or tug-of-war with the scented rag. Over next practice sessions, more barking is required in order to get that rag-reward. The more excited and agitated the dog gets over finding the raccoon cage, the better.

The next important step is to meet a real raccoon. Most dogs "get it" that this critter is serious business. Tracking suddenly becomes more purposeful for the dog if it "clicks" with him that the raccoon scent leads to a living critter rather than just a toy.

If you live in the country with raccoons on your property, you might be able to trap one in a humane "have-a-heart" trap. However, do consult the online rules of the Department of Natural Resources websites to find the legal trapping season in your area. Just google "raccoon hunting season."



If you do trap a live raccoon, be very careful in handling the caged animal. Wear heavy leather gloves. Have your Airedale leashed, and let him get excited by getting close to the cage, but not so close that he catches a tooth in the cage wire or comes in contact with the raccoon. After the training experience, put your dog away and release the unharmed raccoon. *HWA does not advocate dogs harming furred game for training or test purposes.*

If you're unable or unwilling to trap a real raccoon at home, come to our Nationals. Most Airedales find meeting a raccoon up close and personal is a hackles-raising experience that stirs up deeply bred-in instincts. If you've been wondering "Why bother doing this," your dog may well show you he was meant to do this.



The successfully trained fur hunter proves it in a Hunt Test. Dogs must track off-leash, locate the safely caged raccoon, and bark to announce the find. Airedales may earn Junior, Senior or Master Fur titles in these tests. These Fur Test titles, when combined with Upland and Retriever titles for game birds, make for a Versatile title that recognizes the full range of Airedale hunting abilities.