Teaching and Using a Start Article in CKC Urban Tracking

By Laura McKay

What is a Start Article?

In AKC tracking tests, there is no scent pad at the start of a track, but there is an article that has been scented by the tracklayer. As of January 1, 2020, CKC urban tests have a start pad as before, but also a scented start article is available at the start for the handler to use if desired (i.e. it's optional for the handler). The start article can be handed directly to the handler by the tracklayer, or can be placed in a 'ziploc-type' bag that can be given to the handler. Clubs running CKC urban tests should have a start article available for every urban track. The CKC start article can be leather or fabric and is scented by the tracklayer. In AKC tests handlers can use the start article to re-scent their dogs on the track whenever they feel their dog is lost. Re-scenting in not currently allowed in CKC tests, however.

Why do we need a Start Article?

The purpose of the CKC start article is to allow the dog to identify the tracklayer's scent among all scents that may be present at the start of an urban track. In urban areas, people and/or animals unconnected with the test may have contaminated the start prior to the dog running the test. It is not possible to guarantee that no other person or animal will walk across the start of an urban track before or after it is laid and prior to the dog running the test. There are two types of scenarios where the start pad may be contaminated:

1. A Crossover Scenario where people other than the tracklayer and/or animals may cross the start pad (see Figure 1).
2. A Common Path Scenario where people other than the tracklayer and/or animals may go to the start pad and follow the track for a distance before leaving the track (see Figure 2). This might occur where there is a natural flow to the environment such that people or animals have a tendency to walk along the same path as the part of first leg of the track.

How do you use a Start Article?

There are currently no rules about how the article is to be used, except that it cannot be used to re-scent the dog after it has gone more than 10 m past the start. The handler can ask for the article as they approach the scent pad and let the dog sniff it. The handler could put the article on the scent pad and point to it. It is up to the handler whether they take the article with them or leave it at the scent pad.

I let my dog sniff the start article a couple of meters before the start pad and then approach the scent pad, where I put the article on the ground and point to it. I then proceed to start my dog as I would on a field track or any track without the start article.

How to Teach the dog to use the Start Article

Although some dogs immediately understand the scent article, others don't and ignore it. I teach the scent article to my dogs and proof contaminated starts as follows:

1. Begin by putting scented start articles on the scent pad of urban tracks you train on. The dog may not make use of the article, but this will get the dog used to having the article there. Some people place the article in the dog's mouth to draw their attention to the scent on it. I don't think it's worth forcing the article on a reluctant dog, but if you toss the article and/or point to it and make a big deal out of it, you may be able to convince the dog that it is important to you.

2. Once your dog is used to having an article at the start, you can begin to teach them to differentiate between more than one scent around the start flag. Have two different tracklayers, each with a start article and a final article, lay separate short (e.g. 30 m) straight tracks diverging from scent pads close to each other, approximately a meter apart. Each tracklayer will place a final article down at the end of their track, retaining the start article for the handler to use. Run the dog on each track, one at a time using the appropriate start article to orient the dog to the correct start pad and track for that tracklayer. Allow the dog to investigate the 'wrong' start pad, but discourage the dog from following that track. If necessary, you may have to encourage the dog to go to the correct scent pad. Repeat this drill on separate occasions until you feel that the dog appears to understand the relationship between the start article and the track you want them to follow.

3. Once the dog understands which of two adjacent scent pads they should go to and follow the track from, you can gradually move the scent pads closer together until the second tracklayer lays a start pad overtop of the start pad laid by the first tracklayer (see Figure 1). This represents the crossover contaminated scent pad where different people/animals walk over the start pad but from different angles.

4. Once the dog understands the Crossover Scenario and can reliably select the correct track using the start article, train the dog to follow the correct track where a common path exits the start (see Figure 2). Use the same procedure as with the Crossover Scenario, but have the two tracklayers walk parallel, but a meter or so apart, for a distance before one turns off the common path, while the other tracklayer continues for a distance before turning in the opposite direction. Run the dog on each track, using the scented start articles from each tracklayer as a guide to the dog. Gradually move the two parallel paths together until the second tracklayer is following the exact path of the first until turning off.

Figure 1.Training a Crossover Scenario. Two tracklayers (blue and red) lay scent pads over top of each other and leave the start in different directions. The dog (black) is brought to the start flag and shown the start article of each tracklayer in turn.
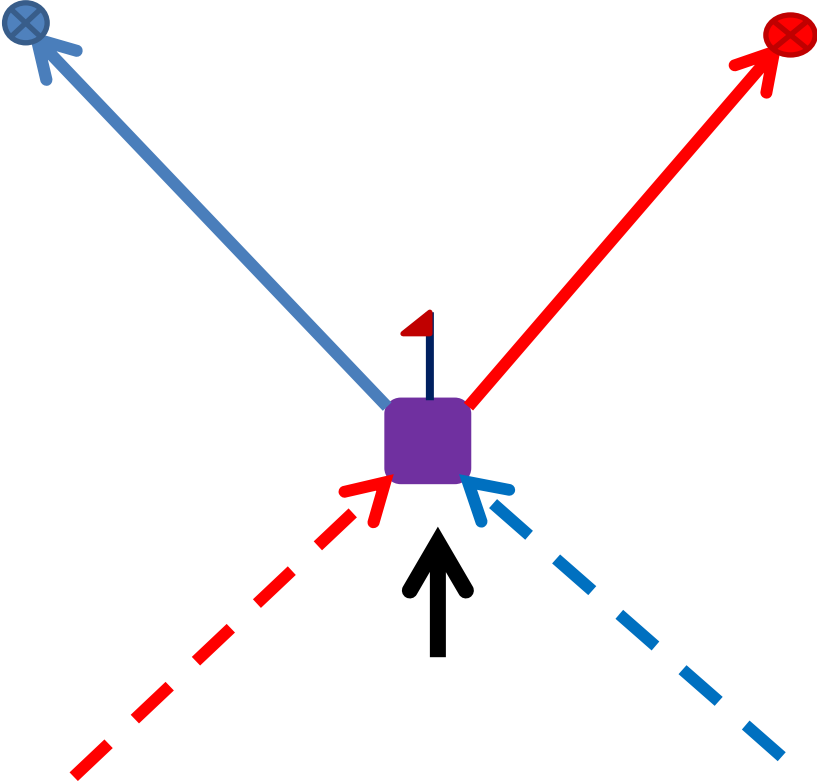
Figure 2.Training the Common Path Scenario. Two tracklayers (blue and red) lay scent pads over top of each other and leave the start initially on the same path and then turn in opposite directions before dropping the final article. The dog (black) is brought to the start flag and shown the start article of each tracklayer in turn.