

You Don't Have to Train a Dog to Track?

I have heard many ongoing debates about this statement for as long as I can remember. What does this mean exactly? Let's talk a little bit about the meaning of this statement as I see it and, where it might actually fit into our training process. I'll try unpacking this loaded statement the best I can.

Let me start by explaining a few details that are already known to us through science. These are not theories, they are facts that I hope will help clarify how the training for tracking dogs really works.

In order to get a better understanding of what this statement might mean it's helpful to have a little background about wolves and what they have passed on genetically to domestic dogs. There is overwhelming genetic evidence that dogs are descended from wolves. Science has come a long way. In the last ten years, sophisticated genetics analysis has been added to existing and ongoing archeological research on the question of dog origins. The current best knowledge is that dogs are descended from wolves and that this took place in Asia something on the order of 15,000 years ago. Grey wolves if you are interested.

Wolves—and all wild animals are born with “FAPS” or Fixed Action Patterns. Also known as "innate behaviors." FAPs are organized under 4 categories. Flight, Flight, Feeding, and Courtship (reproduction). Tracking would be part of the “Feeding” category and is considered a predatory behavior. FAPs are behaviors that by definition require no learning. Animals do them without any training whatsoever.

Sometimes FAPS are referred to as "hardwired behavior," "pre-installed behavior" or "bundled software and from an evolutionary perspective, likely serve important survival functions in wild animals. For example; Predatory behaviors such as searching (tracking falls under this), stalking, rush/chase, grab, kill, dissect and eat are all predatory FAPs are a sequence of behaviors common to all members of a species that are stereotyped and require no learning. This sequence is really fascinating if you're interested in dog behavior because selective breeding for various jobs that dogs do are stylized, modified or exaggerated versions of one or more behaviors in this sequence. For a wolf, if even one of the predatory sequences in this chain is missing, it won't survive to reproduce. It's all or nothing. So it's safe to say that wolves living in the wild that live to reproductive age have most likely inherited a full set of the predatory sequences. This does not hold true for domestic dogs. Because of selective breeding by humans, dogs may inherit some FAPS but not others. For instance, a dog may have some but not all of the predatory sequences that a wolf would need to survive in the wild. Dogs that do inherit the FAPs we humans consider useful are selectively bred to make them stronger—biting, tracking, searching, stalking and chasing to name just a few.

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Another example of a FAP would be a baby deer that has just been born that lies still in the grass as soon as its mother leaves. The behavior or urge to lay still is triggered by the mother leaving. If the baby had to take the time to learn this behavior, it would not survive the day. The software for this behavior comes pre-installed—no learning required. Its adaptive significance is to help the deer survive to reproductive age and pass on its genes.

Now, all that being said, there are some parts of the tracking training process we get for free from mother nature, kind of like a discount coupon or a head start. I think the inherited software that some dogs acquire from their wolf ancestors and strengthened through careful selective breeding practices is what most are referring to when they say “you don't have to teach a dog to track”. This software—in this case tracking software, can be triggered naturally and with no learning, just like the baby deer. For example; An interesting scent that the dog would like to follow and investigate can trigger a strong predatory tracking response with no prior learning required. Just like a running rabbit can trigger a predatory chase response. This is mother natures contribution to our own training process but it does not guarantee a sure outcome without assisting the dog in developing its natural skill. Fixed Action Patterns (in this instance the tracking FAP) in animals can be refined and greatly improved upon with practice or training. For example-- predators get better at their craft after lots of practice but the basic behavior is already there. That's where the trainer's job comes into play. In my opinion, the process benefits from both pre-installed software and carefully graduated training steps that are designed to assist the dog in developing its tracking skills. And, I will add that during the training process, we humans must learn to read the relevant behaviors from the dogs we are training as the training process continues to develop and evolve.

The process for training a reliable tracking dog can be a long one—1 to 2 years in most cases and I think its important for people to understand that there are also many training steps required to help the dog hone its skills--in addition to the help we get from mother nature that cannot be ignored if we want a reliable working dog in the end. The words “you don't have to train a dog to track” can be a very misleading statement for some and, in my opinion, can imply that any human involvement in the training process is not really necessary, and that all we have to do is hang on to the end of the lead and let the dog run its own software. If we are going to make blanket statements like this then we need to thoroughly explain what that statement means and where it fits into the overall training process. I think it really pays to be mindful about how we are communicating things to others. I mean let's face it, the untrained dog left to his own devices—even with the best FAP software will not be successful as a working dog without a substantial amount of training and effort on our part. Happy Trails!