

A Tracker's Journey

BY TERRY COX FIEDLER,
WITH DOLORES BRIGHAM & LAURA STADTMORE

Cold early morning darkness dissipates to a dull blue grey cloudy sky above the Ohio countryside. Winter weather warnings reverberated through the media channels. Snow is on the way. This is track test day for Basenji Ben and his human partner Terry. Maps of the plotted test track are attached to clipboards. The tracking judges stand in silent anticipation. Terry enters the field of short winter dry grass with the Basenji at her side. They pause for a moment. Looking down at her curly tail tracking partner Terry asks, "Are you ready?" Terry reaches down and unhooks the clip of the 33 ft long biothane tracking line from the Basenji's collar. Reattaching the clip to the tracking harness, Terry gives the verbal signal to track. Basenji Ben takes in the human scent from the cloth article next to the start flag and begins. Ben passes his tracking test this day. He is the latest Basenji to earn an American Kennel Club Tracking Dog title.

THE BASENJI CLUB OF AMERICA standard describes the Basenji as having the ability to hunt with both sight and scent. The AKC tracking test provides an opportunity to evaluate a Basenji's ability to follow the tracklayer's path using only its nose.

To begin AKC Tracking competition a dog must obtain a Tracking Certification under the observation of an AKC Tracking Judge. If successful, four certificates for official entries in tracking competitions are given to the handler. The certificates are good for one year. Each time a handler enters a dog in a Tracking Dog test a certificate must be relinquished. Once in competition, a dog only needs to complete one track successfully to earn a title. All tests are pass/fail.

Tracking levels in American Kennel Club

A dog can earn three AKC Tracking titles: Tracking Dog (TD), Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX), and Variable Surface Tracking (VST). Each test has an increased degree of difficulty. The TD title must be earned before competing for a TDX or VST title. A Champion Tracker Certificate (CT) is awarded only to those dogs that have earned all three tracking titles—TD, TDX and VST.

Each tracking test challenges the dog in different ways:

The TD test includes following a track 440 to 500 yards long with three to five changes in direction. The track is aged between 30

minutes to two hours before the dog begins the test. The start of the track is marked with a start flag. A second flag is placed 30 yards from the start flag to indicate the direction of travel. A cloth article approximately the size of a glove or wallet is placed at the start flag for the dog to take scent from. A second article is placed at the end of the track which the dog must indicate. Tracks are plotted in an open field with uniform cover.

The TDX test includes following a longer and older track. This track is 800 to 1,000 yards and has been aged between three to five hours. There are also five to seven direction changes and human cross tracks as an added challenge. The start is marked with a single flag and the dog must determine the direction of travel. There are four dissimilar articles for the dog to find. The first article is placed by the start flag. Three other articles will be dropped at wide intervals directly on the track which the dog must indicate. The tracks are plotted in open fields with varying cover, roads, ditches and woods.

The VST test is one of the most difficult tests for a tracking dog. The test replicates tracking in a real world urban environment situation. The VST track is 800 to 1,000 yards long with 4 to 8 turns and three to five hours old. The articles are made from leather, cloth, plastic and metal. The VST challenges the dog to track over various surfaces such as vegetation, concrete, and sand with one turn on a non-vegetated surface such as concrete.

Rain, snow, and various weather conditions may also add to the challenge on test day.

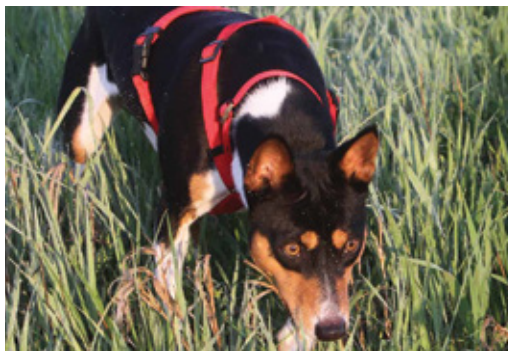
Basenji journey in AKC tracking history

The AKC held the first licensed tracking test in April 1936. Tracking was originally part of the Utility class (UD). To earn a UD title a dog had to pass a separate tracking test. In 1947 Tracking Dog test was made a separate class. The tropical climate of Hawaii set the stage for the Basenji breeds journey into AKC Tracking history. In 1972 Basenji Tammy, "CH Il-Se-Ott Golden Majorette" with her human partner Rex Tanaka successfully passed an AKC sanctioned tracking test earning the Tracking Dog title. Rex, a K9 instructor, and Basenji Tammy earned all five titles awarded by the American Kennel Club at the time from Champions to Utility Dog Tracking! Rex also earned TD's with two other Basenji, "CH Tenkis Fula Aquarius Azenda UD, TD" and "Fula Fair Lady of the Congo UD, TD."

The tracking community urged AKC to develop a more advanced type of tracking test. In March 1980 the Tracking Dog Excellent (TDX) went into effect. Colorado is the next stop of the Basenji's journey into AKC tracking history. Takuvik Basenji's JoAnn Weller and her Basenji partner, "Springs CC of Takuvik" earned their TDX in 1983. A remarkable Basenji tracking accomplishment which will take 27 years for Dolores Brigham and her Basenji Phoebe "CH Akuaba' Singer At Lisanne VCD3" to repeat.

In 1995 AKC developed the Variable Surface Tracking (VST) tracking test for the urban environment. Basenji fandom is still waiting for a Basenji to earn their VST and Champion Tracker Certificate!

Clockwise from top:
 TERRY'S BEN ON A SCENT
 DOLORES IN THE FIELD WITH PHOEBE
 LAURA AND TAMU IN THE RIBBONS



Basenjis in the field

In the 1980's Dolores Brigham began tracking in upstate New York with Belgian Sheepdogs. Over the years Dolores has earned 7 TDs and 3 TDxs with her Belgian Sheepdogs. Dolores's very talented Basenji Phoebe "CH Akuaba' Singer At Lisanne CDX" was doing very well in agility. Just on a lark in 2000, Dolores took Phoebe out in a small agility field and started tracking her. Phoebe was talented in tracking too and in 2005 became the second Basenji to achieve a TDx. Dolores is currently working on training her Basenji Ruby to the TDx tracking level. Dolores feels Basenjis are easier to work with than Belgians. Belgians are fast, pull harder and tend to do a lot of searching on turns. Sometimes the dogs will move around and around like a lunging horse. Dolores's Basenjis work slower, though she encourages them to pull, and are much quicker making turns and indicating loss of scent faster. Sometimes Basenjis can be distracted by a deer or start crittering. An effective "leave it!" command can be useful.

December 2012 Laura Stadtmere earned a TD title with Basenji Tamu "CH Foress Nyingi Mno One Too Many At Hatikvah RA TD" in Southern California. A beginning tracker, Laura is learning about the sport from AKC Tracking Judge Sally Nesbitt, www.sallynesbitt.com. Tamu provided Sally the opportunity to work with a Basenji. She believes the Basenji is a very intelligent dog which loves to learn. When training a Basenji to track, the most important knowledge Laura has learned from her mentor is to keep the lessons short and interesting. Analyze each dog for

their strengths. Turn each lesson into a fun game. Always quit while you are ahead. Sally believes the dog should have a solid foundation of learning at each training step.

Both sight & scent hounds

During the 1970's a new sight hound sport, Lure Coursing, was becoming popular. The American Sight Hound Association (ASFA) began allowing Basenjis to participate in ASFA event in 1979. To the best of our knowledge JoAnn Weller and her Basenji "Springs CC of Takuvik" were the first Basenji to earn an ASFA Field Champion (FCH) and AKC Tracking titles. Followed by Russ Jacobs with "CH Reveille Early Light" Lure Courser of Merit (LCM), TD and Terry Atkinson with "CH Reveille Wassail CDX, TD, LCM." The American Kennel Club began offering lure coursing titles in 1991. The Basenji fandom are still waiting for someone to earn both advanced AKC Field Champion (FC) lure coursing and tracking titles.

The inaugural AKC National Tracking Invitational (NTI) was held in September 2003 at the Biltmore Estate in Asheville, North Carolina. The NTI showcases 10 champion tracking dogs in the biannual event. Held at the Biltmore Estate, Asheville, NC in 2003, 2005 and 2007, the NTI moved to the Bernheim Arboretum and Research Forest, Clermont, KY in 2009, 2011 and 2013.

Basenjis can excel in canine sports which challenge both sight and scent. Add the sport of tracking to your list of fun things to do with your curly tail partner. In the USA about 250 clubs are licensed to hold AKC sanctioned

tracking trials. Go to the American Kennel Club web site www.akc.org to find tracking judge and club information in your area. 🐾