



# Mastery and Maturity in the Sport of Tracking

## Spiritdance Tracking & Coaching

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**The Tracking Championship title has been in effect for ten years now, and there are roughly 60 Tracking Champions. There are more per year recently as training methods catch up and as experienced people repeat their performance with new dogs. Still, at roughly 6 TCHs per year a discussion of Mastery and Maturity after ten years of urban tracking seems practical.**

The newest title in the CKC Tracking world is the Master Tracking Champion title. This title is conferred on the dog that passes two more advanced level tests under different judges – after becoming a Tracking Champion (holding all four titles in the sport).

The term “Master” has inspired me to consider what it means to be a *master* in a discipline or sport. At the same time, I think it is worthwhile to explore the concept of *handler maturity* since it means ‘reaching the most advanced stage in a process.’

The sport of tracking is not alone in having a Master-level title. Master championships and Grand Master championships can be attained in Obedience, Rally, Agility and Hunt tests.

The rules for these are generally that teams must enter tests and acquire a new set of points, qualifying or perfect scores, be judged by different judges than those passed under previously and even achieve high in class or high in trial awards.

In keeping with the few opportunities we have to get into tracking tests, and the low numbers tests can support, the criteria for a Master Tracking Championship are to pass two more advanced tests under different judges. Sounds easy, right?

But like all of tracking, we have few opportunities to practice for a real test. Teaching tracking is difficult due to the time and space requirements and so finding an instructor is not easy across Canada.

Many people enter tests never having seen one, and few have mentors or role models in this sport. Compared with other dog sports this makes tracking seem mysterious and elusive.

Unlike elite athletes, we aren’t competing alone. We enter as a team member with our trusty tracking dog in the lead. A scenario that can be considered is that our dog is the true *master*.

This is particularly true if a relatively new or inexperienced, *immature* handler has been gifted with a great dog - or has worked hard, with great instruction and a little luck, to pass all four titles required to enter tests for the new MTCH.

Some people may be starting from square one as beginners to the sport, and determined to master the skills, with ambitious tracking goals. Others may be experienced in the sport and pursuing ways to fill in gaps in training to achieve those next steps. And some people reading this may be Masters in the sport of tracking! If so well done! I hope you find this information interesting and even useful.

Below are definitions of the terms Mastery and Maturity. \* Do you see yourself?

## Mastery

- Comprehensive knowledge or skill in a subject or activity.
- A skilled practitioner of a particular art or activity
- Masters - a class in some sports for competitors over the usual age for the highest level of competition
- A Chess Master
- Great artists or musicians known as masters
- Masters - A post graduate degree

## Maturity

- Fully developed physically; full-grown
- Having reached a stage of mental or emotional development characteristic of an adult
- Having reached the most advanced stage in a process
- Mature reflection, thought or planning that is careful and thorough
- Used to describe someone middle-aged or old

*\*Oxford Dictionary online*

At first blush, you might think, *“Well I feel like a Master because I have comprehensive knowledge of tracking and a lot of skills needed for the sport.”* However, if you have not demonstrated it yet - and demonstrated it consistently - you are not a Master.

We often feel like masters in our training, but testing is where we see the results of our hard work and find the holes in our buckets! In tests we deal with nerves, the unknown and the need to recall and utilize our skills under stress in sometimes difficult conditions.

On the path to mastery, trackers learn from this and go forward rather than becoming discouraged and giving up. Perseverance and not losing heart are two signs of people on the path to mastering any discipline.

Monet and Van Gogh weren't called masters until their paintings were completed and seen by others and in Van Gogh's case, it was not until well after his death that his mastery was truly appreciated.

John McEnroe's *repeated* tennis victories established him as a Master in the sport. Similarly, in tracking, we should be able to demonstrate repeatedly that we can achieve titles with our canine partners to show the skills and knowledge are part of the equation beyond one great partnership and gifted canine partner.

Bobby Fischer became the International Grand Master of Chess at age 15. Having started playing chess at age 6, he was both a Master of the game, and was also *mature* in his sport at an early age.

While being mature can refer to age, it can also refer to having the ability to plan and make decisions that are characteristic of someone who has reached the advanced stages of a discipline.

In tracking, age is not the definition of maturity in the sport. A lot of people don't begin to track until after they have been through other dog sports however, and many people come to tracking later in life.

Maturity and discipline can be attained through wisdom of the years and experience gained from other dog sports, work with horses or other disciplines such as running or music.

Accomplishments in other areas will bring the concepts of practice, planning and follow through to tracking. You will still need to put in the time and miles in tracking to learn the rules and gain experience.

Bobby Fischer is also someone author Malcolm Gladwell might call an “*Outlier*” having achieved the magic 10,000 hours of practice and having other things in place (such as timing, opportunity and being a genius!) that gave him an advantage. Elvis Presley, Bill Gates, Tiger Woods and Bobby Orr could also be called Outliers.

**Since many of us don’t come to the sport of tracking as children, we will likely never be “Outliers”, but we can become Masters in the sport of tracking if we meet certain criteria.**

This fall and winter, I have had the great fortune of coaching a small, diverse group of committed trackers from across Canada, beginners and advanced levels.

We have had some great discussions about Tracking Mastery, how to define it and how to achieve it.

Here are some of the group thoughts on how to achieve Tracking Mastery:

- Become educated about tracking and what sets mastery apart
- Develop criteria for Tracking Mastery
- Identify the specific skills required to master tracking as a discipline
- Set goals to attain mastery
- Seek instruction from someone who can help us achieve our goal
- Get our mental and physical game together
- Grow forward

We have also reviewed criteria that set beginners working on foundations apart from experienced handlers working on fine points in this sport.

## On the path to Tracking Mastery

Signs of a Tracking Master can include:

- confident in their knowledge and a strong belief in their abilities
- surpassed basics through structured and repetitive training
- accumulated practical experience
- trains for excellence and a personal best
- self-reliant and not seeking approval
- trains mindfully and with intention
- equipped to tackle obstacles on their path
- enjoys challenges
- understands the skills required
- performs skills consistently to achieve success
- has deep insights into their particular talents or gifts
- knows where to focus their efforts in training
- performs complex skills and routines as subconscious habits, easily and automatically
- makes proactive decisions quickly
- has a greater ability to focus on context and environment
- uses a range of visual, auditory and kinesthetic cues in decision-making
- perseveres and does not lose heart; bounces back more determined
- understands how to train and support their canine partner
- has insight into their dog’s talents, gifts and needs
- adjusts to the dog they are handling

**In the beginning, participants in any sport, including tracking, may be identified by the following traits – and some are especially true of beginners in tracking:**

- view the sport as abstract and having random, unpredictable outcomes
- self-critical and doubts in own ability
- struggle with basics
- set back by disappointments, confused and frustrated
- cautious of acting on beliefs without approval or support
- have no focus or goals in training
- hesitant or slow to react or make decisions
- inattention to details
- neglect basic foundation skills
- easily swayed by the ideas and opinions of others or jump from one idea or method to another

**And what are the specific skills we aspire to, as we work towards the goal of Master Tracking?**

Everyone will have opinions about the most important skills for successful tracking. I believe everyone should start with the strongest foundations possible to ensure basics are in place, ideally working with an instructor.

**Basics would include** scent understanding; strong starts; line handling; article value; shaping your dog's behaviour on track and building and maintaining your dog's confidence and motivation. When these skills are in place, they must be practiced consistently and maintained until they become habit.

Tracking beginners will be awkward at first, as they learn new skills and handling. Having instruction and strong role models helps with constant improvement.

Similarly, to move into advanced levels of performance it is important to have a vivid picture of what good handling and successful training looks like.

**Advanced skills are to perform the basics *even better*, adding layers of intuition, automatic behaviour, excellent habits and a greater awareness of surroundings that enables faster decision-making to support your dog every step of the way through your actions and words.**

You may notice that trainers at the Master's level see the sport in logical and tangible steps. They pay attention to details and train with purpose.

Advanced skills include rules knowledge; track design and article placement; reading your dog's body language; reading the environment; spatial awareness; knowing how to train in both field and urban environments; mental and physical endurance and conditioning for advanced tracks and being prepared for distractions, weather and other unexpected situations throughout the track.

**Where does MATURITY come in?**

I hope you'll notice that Master trainers rarely grumble or complain. They love the sport and focus on the positives. They promote the joy of the sport. Having this kind of attitude is a discipline and a choice that shows mental and spiritual maturity.

Mature trainers, having been through years of ups and downs, often become more humble over time. They realize they will always be learning and understand that tracking is subject to many factors outside of our control.

A true Master is compassionate in helping other trackers. I hope you will always see master trackers conduct themselves in a mature manner that is worthy of the title and standing in the sport. The interests of others and future of the sport matter to them.

Mature trainers become single-minded – like an athlete in training. They have a vision, plan and goals. They declutter, set priorities, clear their schedules and adjust their plans to remove

obstacles in the way and anything that hinders their training and progress.

Mature trainers persevere and press on to achieve the goals they have set for themselves, viewing training as a choice, not a chore.

**“All of us who are mature should embrace this view... Only let us live up to what we’ve already attained and act on the guidance we’ve already received!”**

*The Apostle Paul wrote this in his Letter to the Philippians as he encouraged them to press on toward their goal in early years of Christianity (Philippians 3:16)*

Mature trainers realize that they have been helped along the way and know that if they strive just to live up to the examples of other great trainers, they will can be successful!

They acknowledge and respect their mentors along with the community or village (or tracking club) that supports them, and follow the example of their mentors or their coaches and instructors.

Mature trainers are careful not to get sidetracked or influenced. They are cautious of the crowd they spend time with, ensuring that they train and spend time with people who will build them up and not add stress or toxicity to their lives. They know this will impact their progress and joy in the sport. They are careful to only bring these qualities to their circle, not only offering their wisdom, but valuing the contributions of others.

**Focus and determination is especially important when you don’t have a coach, instructor or training leader and are working on your own** – which is the situation that many mature trainers and master trainers find themselves in as they progress to advanced levels.

Master trainers age tracks for up to 5 hours or more. It is almost impossible to find training partners who will hang around for this length of time – and if you have one, treasure them!

Finally, if you are a beginner to the sport and know someone who is working at an advanced level, you can do the honour of making that person *your training master*. They will have a lot to offer to you, and you can grow together.

The sport of tracking is a non-competitive and welcoming sport, but is filled with loners. I hope that beginners feel welcomed and find a coach or instructor who will help you start off “on the right track.”

While tracking may seem mysterious and elusive it is a natural drive for our dogs who are the true masters in the sport. No matter how much knowledge and skill we have, without a dog – or more accurately, a dog’s nose – we would not get very far past a good guess at the first turn! Even on those dewy wet fields where we see the track – a judge wants to see that your dog is in the lead and you are in the supporting role.

That support role is more complex than simply holding the line, and knowing how to develop the skills to support and train a dog, so that it becomes the best it can be, is the hallmark of a master in this sport. Dogs love to track, and we are charged with harnessing that instinct, shaping it, and developing it so that we step up to the start flag as a test-ready team.

No matter how experienced we are, reaching that final article is always an emotional experience. I encourage all advanced, seasoned trackers to remember your first TD – whether you are a coach, instructor or judge. Knowledge is useful, but in tracking, the heart is the key. A dog tracks from its heart and we must train with joy and kindness, and never lose heart, to make the most of our tracking journey.

Above all, treasure the time you spend with your dogs and have fun. Good luck on your tracking journey!

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