

TRACKING DRILLS

PART ONE

Many years ago, I worked with a Harvard grad who taught me about knowledge management. He described two forms of knowledge: codifiable and non-codifiable. If I could read about something in a book or instruction manual, and immediately do it, that was codifiable information. If however, I needed experience, practice, time on the

job learning a skill, that was non-codifiable. That non-codifiable skill usually requires a mentor to develop proficiency.

Most of what I am about to describe falls into the latter category. It will take time practicing, training, reps, whatever you want to call it, to develop proficiency. And finding a mentor will greatly accelerate the learning process, but absent a mentor, these drills will help.

Few have the patience to develop the skill of tracking. It doesn't come without a price. The difference between a good tracker and a beginning tracker is 10,000 tracks. These drills will accelerate the learning process, but you still have to do the work.

Tracking is a term that refers to being able to see, identify, and follow tracks. Tracks generally refer to footprints, but can be a much broader term that includes following electronic transactions or the movements of a criminal across the globe.

Tracking as I wish to discuss it refers to seeing, identifying, interpreting, and following footprints and other sign left by someone's passing.

Beginnings

I started out tracking animals. Under the tutelage of Tom Brown, I became a decent animal tracker. It was not long before I wanted to learn human tracking. At the time, Tom did not teach human tracking. It was easy to apply the animal tracking skills to humans,

but I was interested in learning some specific human tracking. Charles Worsham was the only one I could find to teach it. So I studied with Charles for a time. Later, when I worked at Tracker, Tom taught man tracking and forensic tracking classes. I was getting the itch scratched.

When I formed onPoint Tactical, my objective was to teach military members how to apply tracking to a combat situation. I worked on a number of drills, drawing on what I learned from both Tom and Charles. What follows is a basic primer of how I teach human tracking.

I break human tracking into 4 categories:

- **SAR Tracking** -searching for lost individuals,
- **Pursuit Tracking** - both Combat and LE pursuit,
- **Forensic Tracking** - crime scene analysis, ...and finally
- **Scout Tracking** - reconnaissance or information gathering.

All tracking requires some basic ability. You have to be able to see tracks. There are drills that help with this process.

The 10 Step Drill

Find a place of undisturbed ground that represents the substrate you will spend most of your time tracking in. Hopefully this will not be

smooth rock. Start out in a soil that holds a track. As you begin to master one substrate, you will need to move to another so as to broaden your ability. But as you learn, go easy.

Stand where you can walk straight ahead for thirty feet.

Place a sharpened popsicle stick in the ground directly behind your right heel, to start.



Now walk out 10 steps.



Counting the first track you marked as one, the tenth track will be your left foot.

Place a popsicle stick behind your heel of the tenth track.



You know have eight tracks between one and ten. You know the tracks are there because you just made them. Now your job is to go back to the first track and look at it.

Get down on your hands and knees and study that track.



Look at it until you can see the entire track outline.

Look for evidence of the tread pattern.

Find details that indicate movement. Where the toe pushed off.

After you have studied it a bit, **frame the track** with popsicle sticks. Firmly attach that track in your mind. Since this is the right track, your next track will be a left.



Proceed to **find** the left track and **mark it** with a popsicle stick in the heel. After you are sure of your marking, go to the next track, a right print, and so on until you have marked all ten tracks.



The beauty of this drill is that you know how many tracks there are, and approximately where they are, and now you just have the task of finding them. You are training your brain to see tracks. -Kevin Reeve

After you find the eight tracks, stand behind the first track and look down to the tenth. The line of tracks should alternate and be evenly spaced.



If there is an aberrant track, one way out of the pattern, look at that track and see if you can spot your mistake.

Correct that track and then pull the sticks and repeat.

Over and over.

Over time, you will change substrates, increase the difficulty.

Why this works

There are several principles the explanation of which might help. One is pattern recognition. A human walking leaves an alternating trail, left-right, left-right.

So if you look at the pattern, and see a variance, check the track, it is a good idea to look at the aberrant track. If you're sure it is correct, then look for a reason why. It is usually landscape based. You didn't want to step on the anthill so you moved your left foot further left. You may not have even been aware of it when you laid the trail. Or you may have simply missed the track.

Disturbances

Pattern recognition also applies in another way. **Disturbance to baseline.** The undisturbed ground represents the baseline. Any disturbance to the ground baseline is a track.

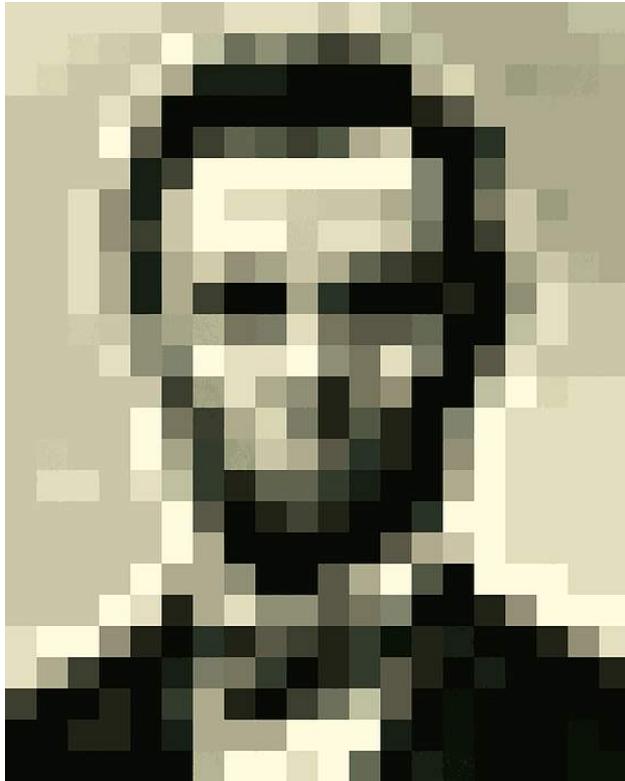
“Intelligence is not only the ability to reason; it is also the ability to find relevant material in memory and to deploy attention when needed.”

— Daniel Kahneman, *Thinking, Fast and Slow*

Most of the time when I am doing the 10 step, I am not looking for a footprint, I am looking for a disturbance to the baseline. Once I recognize a variation in the pattern of the ground, I look for the details of the track that I observed in that first track.

Repeating the 10 Step Drill over and over begins to form in our brains the ability to recognize patterns and variations that will be useful in many aspects of tracking. The more you repeat this drill, the faster and more accurate you become.

When I worked at Apple, one of the advanced technology groups was working on a measuring how the mind perceives partial information and how it extrapolates that into meaningful information. For example, how low a resolution picture can one see and still recognize the image. Consider this image. Can you recognize the person? Most are able to recognize Abe Lincoln in that picture. When I do the 10 step drill enough, I start to need less and less visual data to see the track.



Put another way, if I see my wife in a crowd, she can be turned at an angle and all I can see is her hair and ear and I can still recognize her. But with a photo of a complete stranger, I would have to have a full-face view. I need less visual information to make the ID the better I know that person. The more familiar I am with the person, the faster the ID and the less data required

By repeating the 10 step drill over and over, I will need less and less visual information to recognize a track. At first, I needed to see the complete outline of the track, some of the tread pattern in order to make the ID. But after doing the 10 step drill a thousand times, I needed less and less information to make the recognition of the track. This dramatically increases speed.

“Intuitive” Tracking

Something else begins to happen when you do the 10 step drill over and over. There is a part of your brain called the reticular activating system (RAS) that filters visual data that comes down the optic nerve. When you establish a pattern recognition protocol, your brain, the RAS in particular, grabs ahold of that protocol and starts applying it everywhere it goes. Literally, the more you look at tracks, the more the RAS filters in tracks. Sometime this happens at very unexpected times.

“The situation has provided a cue; this cue has given the expert access to information stored in memory, and the information provides the answer. Intuition is nothing more and nothing less than recognition.” -Herbert Simon, winner of Nobel Prize in Economics

The 10 step drill provides you with the first set of skills that will be useful in trailing, following a set of tracks to the maker. But seeing tracks will be essential in interpreting the behavior of the person making the tracks, from how fast they were moving to why they turned their head to the left when they did. The 10 step drill is the first foundational skill builder.

In the next few articles we will cover several other drills to improve one's ability to track humans.

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