



“After 30 years and 6 different Bloodhounds and attending training seminars every year, I walked away with something that no one had ever taught me. Maybe I wasn’t paying attention in class, but nevertheless, it was a revelation and common sense supports the idea. This is how it is going to be in my work from now on. ”

*Deputy Lou Battistella
Greensburg (PA) Bloodhound Team*

TARGET VALUE – One of the Many “Secrets” of Success

There really isn’t a secret to success in training a Bloodhound—just good, consistent work built on proven methods passed down by experienced handlers and organizations like the National Police Bloodhound Association, founded in 1962. What matters is how well we apply the fundamentals.

Successful training of a Bloodhound is built on a few core principles: knowledge of what needs to be taught and how to present it, repetition to reinforce those lessons, praise to reward correct behavior, fair and immediate correction when needed, and patience—both with the hound and with ourselves.

Our routine training must reflect that. Regular group and individual work should include scent cones, crosswind trails, multiple runners, casting starts, trail direction problems, pool scent, negative trails, and missing member scenarios. These are not just drills—they are the building blocks of reliability.

At the end of the day, a good trail defines a good dog. From the scent article to the cast, to following the track, and ultimately locating the runner with a positive identification—that complete chain is what we are developing. When you train correctly and consistently, you build confidence. And without confidence—specifically, the handler’s trust in the hound—you will never be successful. The way you train is the way you will perform on real calls.

That brings us to one of the most important concepts in man trailing: **Target Value**.

Target value is not just about what reward you use—it's about how much that reward matters to the dog. In simple terms, it is the strength of the dog's belief that finding the person at the end of the track is worth the effort.

For a Bloodhound, the equation is straightforward:
Find the person → receive a meaningful reward.

When target value is high, you will see it immediately. The dog is excited at the start line, committed on the track, and willing to push through age, contamination, terrain, and difficulty. The dog works with purpose because it expects something valuable at the end.

When target value is low, the opposite occurs. Starts are sluggish. Distractions take over. The dog checks out under stress and lacks the motivation to solve problems.

The difference often comes down to how we use rewards—especially treats.

Treats are one of the most powerful tools we have to build drive, but only when used correctly. High-value rewards—such as meat-based treats—should be reserved primarily for the find. Occasionally, they may be used during training to reinforce a particularly difficult problem, but they should never become routine during the track.

If a dog receives those same rewards freely throughout the day, we unintentionally destroy their value. The reward is no longer special. The dog no longer sees it as something to work for. The anticipation disappears, and with it, the drive.

A dog that can get hot dogs in the kitchen has no reason to work a 45-minute track to earn them.

There is also a physiological component. Drive is tied to anticipation—the dopamine response that builds when a reward is expected but not guaranteed. When rewards are constant, that anticipation flattens. The dog stops thinking, “I need to work to get this.”

Add to that simple satiation—a full dog is a less motivated dog—and you begin to see the problem. The clear chain we depend on:
human scent → track → find → reward
becomes blurred.

In practice, maintaining strong target value is straightforward but requires discipline. Rewards used for trailing should be exclusive. The dog should be slightly hungry before work—not deprived, but motivated. The find should always be a meaningful event, with food, praise, and engagement. And above all, high-value rewards should never be freely available.

A simple rule applies:
If it's used for trailing, it should not be casually given.

Target value is the engine that drives performance. When managed correctly, it produces intensity, focus, and reliability. When neglected, it results in weak performance and inconsistent results.

Training progression—from puppy imprinting through operational work—should always reinforce this concept. Early on, we build an emotional response where the dog feels it must get to the person. As the dog matures, we build independence, problem-solving, and commitment to scent. Eventually, we demand endurance and realism, where the dog works long, difficult tracks with delayed gratification. But through every phase, the reward at the end remains meaningful.

Operationally, this becomes even more important. Not every call results in a find, and not every effort should be rewarded equally. Handlers must avoid the temptation to “comfort feed” on the track or reward uncertainty. Instead, we preserve the integrity of the system—rewarding confirmed success and reinforcing effort appropriately without weakening the association.

Just as important is what happens off the training field. Daily life management plays a major role in maintaining drive. Feeding schedules should be structured. High-value items should remain exclusive. The dog’s motivation is built as much at home as it is in training.

In the end, the question is simple:

Is finding that person the most valuable thing in the dog’s world?

If rewards are common and freely given, the answer is no.

If rewards are controlled, meaningful, and tied directly to the work, the answer is yes.

And that is what we are trying to build.

One final thought. Many of us, after working with our first Bloodhound, begin to feel like we have it all figured out. Confidence grows, and sometimes so does ego. But reality has a way of correcting that. When that first dog retires or passes, and you start over with a new hound, you quickly learn that no two dogs are the same.

That experience reminds us of something important: basic training is never beneath us. Reviewing scent work, revisiting fundamentals, and continuing to learn are part of the job—no matter how long you’ve been doing it.

In this business, you are never too experienced to go back to the basics.