

Information on Go To Ground

If you have ever heard anything about the sport of Go To Ground or Earthdog, you probably were told or think that it is only for Terriers or other small hunting dogs. Historically this is generally true, but since you happen to be dealing with Dog Scouts of America "anything is possible"! I had a 75 pound German Shepherd that was determined enough to get through the DSA tunnels and find the rat. As long as we are willing to think outside the box (or tunnel), any dog can exhibit the skills for the Go To Ground Badge.

GTG, like many other dog jobs or sports, is just a specific or modified hunting behavior. All dogs, no matter what breed or mixture they are, come hardwired with hunting instincts such as tracking/trailing (finding their prey), prey drive (chasing), and cooperation with the rest of the "pack" to bring down the prey. Many breeds, especially Sporting, Herding, Hound, and Terrier breeds, have been bred specifically for one or more hunting behaviors, but all dogs have them to some degree. Breeds that have been bred for generations to be passive and nurturing, such as the Saint Bernard, may take longer to become interested in prey and they may never "turn on" as it is called. Many dogs may not become excited about GTG simply because it is a false situation with very little movement of the rat. Without being able to chase moving prey it may take much longer for a dog's prey drive to kick in and make them actively try to reach the rat. Even with the Terrier breeds many do not "turn on" the first time they see prey or until a certain age when all of a sudden the light bulb comes on. One of my Border Terriers did not get interested until she was 3 years old and Terra, the BT I have here, still is not really interested at 3 ½ years and yet her son and daughter at 10 months were trying to get a rat. So each dog will be different, but any dog can do it.

As stated, GTG, is all about the dog's instincts. However, we need to make sure the dog is comfortable with our version of hunting so it is our responsibility to introduce the equipment, prey, and rules of the game properly to the dog so that they can be successful. It is best to introduce the rat and the tunnel separately and above the ground first. You want to break the desired behavior into as many small pieces as you can so that the dog is not overwhelmed. Even if your dog has been in tunnels either for Agility or for fun, this will be different for the dog, especially when you ask him to go down into the deep, dark, scary ground. Another good reason to introduce the rat above ground is that you can move the cage back and forth and use the dog's chase instinct to trigger their prey drive.

When introducing a beginning dog to the rat, first place the cage on the ground and stand back, letting the dog approach on lead and investigate the rat on its own. If the dog seems interested and willing to get close and sniff or scratch at the cage then you can slowly reach down and slowly move the cage backwards. If the dog pursues the cage you may move it more quickly back and forth to invite the dog to chase the rat. Place the cage back down and hold it still and see if the dog is excited enough to bark or dig at the cage to get the rat. Keep the session short and take the rat away when the dog is really interested and trying to get it. Keep your movements slow and calm until you are sure that the dog is not spooked by you, the cage, or the whole situation. It may take several introductions for a dog to become interested. If there is another dog who is interested in the rat and you are SURE that the dog is friendly it often helps, especially with puppies, to let them watch another dog work the rat. If the dogs know each other you might let them work as a pack to get the rat. Sometimes that gives a timid dog the confidence they lack on their own.

Use a short section of tunnel, maybe 6-10 feet long to introduce a dog to the tunnels above ground. You can use food or a toy to get them to run through the tunnel. Most dogs

learn this readily, but be prepared to take extra care if a dog seems confused or scared. This is supposed to be fun for the dog so it may be better to have that dog try again at a different time or day if they get too stressed.

Once a dog is comfortable with the rat and running through a tunnel above ground, you can introduce the going into the ground part. Again you will do this separately. Use a short, straight section of tunnel that is underground and ask the dog to run through it with the handler at the exit end ready with lots of praise, treats, or toy. Make sure that both ends are open so that some light gets in at first. When the dog is comfortable with that, then place the caged rat at the exit end and have them run through the tunnel to the rat. Leave enough room for you to move the cage enough to incite the dog if necessary. Dogs don't generalize like we do so do not be surprised if a dog that worked the rat furiously above ground just sits and stares at the one underground. You may need to let the dog work the rat above ground and then immediately put him in the tunnel and see if that helps the dog understand what is wanted.

Now you want to introduce the final piece, the 90 degree turn. Do this without the rat in the tunnel. If the tunnel liner has trap doors along it, find one near the turn and put the dog in there and have the handler call the dog from the exit or scratch on the liner to help the dog know which way to go. If no trap doors are available you will need to put the dog in one end and have the handler call into the tunnel at the other end. Be prepared to block the exit so the dog cannot turn around and come back out. Make sure the handler "parties" with their dog when it reaches the exit successfully. Okay. The dog now works the rats underground, successfully negotiates the underground tunnel including a turn. Now you need to put all of the pieces together. Sounds simple, but be prepared to go back and repeat one or more stages of training. If the dog has understood everything or is just a natural you will have them zipping down that tunnel and screaming "Rat!" the whole way.

Just a couple of reminders: remember this whole thing is **our** idea so if your dog really doesn't get the point of doing this or just can't stand the sight of a rat that is okay. In fact it may be YOU who doesn't like the rat. We are here to have fun so go find something you both like to do and enjoy yourselves. Also I have described a very simplified version of how to start your dog in GTG in about 30-45 minutes and I know that you know that dog training doesn't work that way but I want to remind you to break it up into many small training sessions (10-15 minutes) and always quit when your dog is doing well and wants more. Take your time. If you do it right the first time you won't have to go back and fix it later.

Resources

If you want to learn more about Go To Ground or Earthdog training, clubs, or competitions the Internet is full of good sites. There are also a few books published on the sport and if you can find a dog club near you they may have a member that competes or hunts and can answer your questions. I have a few websites listed below that you might want to visit.

The American Kennel Club

www.akc.org

The United Kennel Club

www.ukcdogs.com

Jack Russell Terrier Club of America

www.terrier.com

American Working Terrier Association

www.dirt-dog.com

Border Terrier Club of America

<http://clubs.akc.org/btcoa>

Happy Hunting!