

. . . The Best Laid Plans
(My trip to Colorado with CT CH Evrmor's Rose Madder Blackwood "Maddie")

Really there was not much of a plan at all. I was attending the week long American Rottweiler Club National Specialty in Greeley, Colorado. The Club's VST test was on the first day of the Specialty, a Sunday. The following Sunday was Denver Foothill Tracking Association's VST test in Denver. Club rules would not allow me to enter the VST test since I was judging TD tests. So I decided since I was driving 1100 miles, I might as well try and enter Maddie even though that Sunday date conflicted with the Sieger Show at our National Specialty where we had 2 puppies entered for judges from Croatia and Sweden. Since the car was already packed full of dogs and other items for a week long stay, when Maddie was drawn as 1st alternate, I was debating whether to take her at all. Fortunately for me, the next day I was informed that one exhibitor had withdrawn so we were in. That sealed the decision to go with Maddie.

Once again, I was entering a VST test at a site I had never seen before. Both Jack and Lang, my two prior CT dogs, passed at sites I had never laid eyes on. It seemed this had worked in the past so I really had no reservations about taking Maddie to Denver. She is almost 8 years old, the litter mate to CT CH Blackwood Langolier, my 2nd CT dog. I figured with a Rottweiler's average life expectancy of around 10 years of age, I needed to take advantage of all opportunities that were presented.

Our National Specialty went well and, in fact, we had a Rottweiler pass the VST and become a Champion Tracker at the Rottweiler Specialty VST. Judging was great at Chatfield Reservoir and the rest of the Specialty was nice but busy. The test site was about 1.5 hour South of Greeley, Colorado so once again, I had to get up very early to make the trip through Denver. We arrived just in time for the draw and for some needed refreshments provided by Denver Foothills. The people there were very friendly as well as helpful. I assumed I would have been the person traveling the farthest but learned that someone had actually driven from Maine with 2 entries for the test. We drew track 5. I watched the other dogs run before us including track 4 which was a Golden Retriever that passed. Maybe this was a good omen?

I have included here a tracing I made of one of my maps for Maddie's track. I had to make it a bit darker so you could see it and filled in only the basic information. The wind was very gusty from our rear blowing down the track at the start. As you can tell, the track had a little more non-vegetated surfaces than grass. These included asphalt, dirt, wood shavings, some pea gravel, and concrete.

For those of you who have seen Maddie work TDX, she has made great strides in the last few months. She passed her TD fairly easily but seemed to struggle on her TDX tracks though she had been close to passing on other occasions before finally passing in January 2010. I think the turn around in her was due to some motivational help by several local trackers in Houston and particularly Kathleen Milford who helped me with short motivational tracks and rewards for Maddie prior to her passing her TDX. Maddie had been working VST as sort of a vacation from TDX for about a year and even entered a local test in Houston that did not fill for "practice". I felt confident Maddie could pass a VST otherwise, I would not have entered but she had some trouble with her moment of truth turn in the weeks leading up to our trip to Denver.

Her start was in a grassy area adjacent to a school building on what used to be a military officer housing area and now is part of the Colorado Mental Health System. She overshot the first corner a bit onto driveway but returned after searching back into the wind. She found the leg, crossed the sidewalk and back into grass and down a slight slope to a one-story school building. The building was 10-15 yards from the turn. Maddie went to the corner of the building, looked briefly to the left, and returned to where the corner actually was and proceeded along the sidewalk and grassy area to find her first article which was a plastic scrubber sponge, right next to a full bottle of baby's milk which she sniffed, curled her lip at, and then went to the plastic article indicating it by touching it with her foot. Surely the judges did not use a baby bottle for an article? They did not. I did pick it up, showed it to them, and threw it on the ground since I was pretty sure that was not the correct article.

Maddie then crossed an area near a swing set that had wood shavings followed by some dirt leading into a moderate sized parking lot with 10-15 cars parked in it. Of course, the leg could have gone across the parking lot but when Maddie reached the first row of cars, she circled behind the car and returned to the front of the car making the turn essentially within a car length of the moment of truth turn as plotted. This is about the best hard surface turn she ever made, with little hesitation on her part going the right direction. We even met up with a pedestrian carrying an armload of something from one of the buildings to their car. Maddie walked right by her as she headed out of the parking lot onto grass and toward another building. She started to go towards the building but did not get far from the track, made a right turn, and moved fairly quickly to her metal article which was a small foil-type tin on grass. Up until this point, she really had what seemed to be a fairly easy time following the track.

She restarted well in a grassy area which was really a small field interspersed with dirt and thin grass. Her next turn was a left turn on grass. She made 2-3 30' lead length casts in the direction of 2 buildings which were in front of us but kept returning mostly searching to the left. Eventually she started to the left on grass. I followed her crossing into an asphalt/concrete area that looked like a wide long driveway headed to a busy street. As it turned out, this was a 140 yard leg of asphalt which, as you can see from the map, had buildings and dumpsters on either side of it.

Maddie spent what I thought was an eternity searching the dumpsters which were about 20 yards to our right from the track. She then cast onto grass towards some portable buildings on the other side of the track but always came back to me. At one point, I did give her water as she was getting warm. I am guessing that from the turn on this leg to our next turn onto grass, she spent 25-30 minutes of her total run time carefully searching various directions but always returning to the driveway. I did have serious consideration on both sides of the track that maybe it went one of those directions, but she never committed or pulled past the ends of any of the buildings. She slowly continued moving in the general direction down the driveway toward the street. I had a pretty good idea we were not going to be crossing a busy street but at the last turn, the track could have gone to the right or left. The turn was in the middle of the driveway onto some gravel then into grass. This was the first point of the track I had any indication where the tracklayer walked. The grass was some type of winter rye and footsteps could be seen to my left after Maddie made the turn. I knew we made 5 or 6 turns so far so I thought we had to be getting pretty close. She made several casts toward the street and probably would have paralleled the track to the article though I wanted her to work closer to the track itself. By this time, the judges had moved up to the last corner and had no

intention letting Maddie or myself back up past the corner. She finally settled into the last leg which proceeded along the front of a building crossing a little depression and up a small rise. I was at last able to see amongst some other trash on the ground, a square piece of leather which Maddie promptly placed her foot on, which is her article indication.

The horns began honking from across the street from the gallery and the judges and tracklayer following were very generous with their applause and congratulations. As you can see from the attached photograph, I can think of no more appropriate sign to use for a VST site!

Maddie, of course, had a steak dinner that evening and spent much of the trip home sleeping in the car while I tried to stay awake. I indeed have been fortunate to have such wonderful dogs and people to track with in the Houston area and across the country who have encouraged and helped me reach the goals I have set for some of my dogs.