

Sydney's VST Track - September 14, 2008

I've often joked that in order to pass a VST Test, all the planets have to be in alignment and one must be in good favor of the tracking gods. While this may not be true, I do know that for me everything must be right. Whether this is having good karma or a pleasant physical and environmental atmosphere or just a nice state of mental well being things must be right. So on Thursday evening, September 11, 2008, Sydney and I headed to Denver for the Columbine State Poodle Club's VST Test that would be held at the Fort Logan Mental Health Center and Arapahoe County Municipal Center.

Along our 1662-mile journey to and from Denver, we were able to always stop for gas at what would turn out to be the lowest priced stations in that particular area and stay at motels on the first floor with easy access to the rooms. While in Denver, I went to restaurants that I had not eaten at before. On Sunday morning, while I had worn a T-shirt that I had passed our TDX Test in and a sweatshirt that had been worn at a couple of non-passing tracking tests, the other attire was brand new. You might get the sense from this that I have a few superstitions. Maybe this feeling of having things that will bring you "good luck" is part of one's mental state of mind at tracking tests.

I was the last draw for this eight-dog entry so my lot was in the hands of the seven other exhibitors. The tracking order for the first four exhibitors was 7, 5, 6 and 8. This put all of these tracks at the Arapahoe County Municipal Buildings or College. The last four exhibitors would get the Fort Logan Mental Health Center with all of the activity surrounding this site including the adjacent soccer fields. Track 4 was drawn then 3 leaving tracks 1 and 2 available for the next exhibitor to choose. She picked one. The first track began on a greenbelt with a busy street to the south and Sheridan High School parking lot immediately to the north. The Belgian Tervuren started well, went down the grass to the first left turn into the parking lot, overshot the "moment of truth" turn, wasn't able to recover and was failed.

Our track was in a field just to the west of the first track within walking distance of where we had parked. The field was the size of a soccer field but vegetated with scrubby weeds. The judges, Dr. Anne Hershey and Kiki Lamb, pointed me in a direction to the starting flag pretty much in the center of the field with the street to my left and a fenced in soccer field to my right. A soccer game was in progress with all of the yelling you would expect to hear at a sporting event of this kind.

At the flag I put on Sydney's harness and told her to "find it". The article at the flag was a square piece of black leather. Things were going right from the start because on several of the other tracks this black leather article was placed on asphalt and missed by the dogs and handler. She sniffed the article went straight ahead and then broke right circling behind me to my left and then back in front of me halting on the leg. Finally she moved forward in a steady pace. The judges told me that several times they had to run but I felt her pace was comfortable. After about 90 yards we came on the manicured lawn in front of a building. Sydney veered a little left then went towards a door in the middle of that section of the building but never reached it. She turned right and nose down went between the buildings on our left and the fence to the soccer field on our right. After 50 yards or so we were approximately ten feet from the fence and another thirty

feet from being directly behind the soccer goal. There was a rush of activity on the field but Sydney never acknowledged their presence. She continued on another fifty yards and turned left going another twenty yards to the first intermediate article. She sat at the sock and I patted her head, held up the article and told her to “find some more”. She continued in the westerly direction for another forty yards and went into an asphalt parking lot. Going straight, she overshot what was to be the “moment of truth” turn and went almost to the end of the lot. A sidewalk, greenbelt and street were in front as Sydney turned to the right then back to the left towards a maintenance and loading dock area. While there was the sidewalk she could have gone to, she gravitated to a landscaped area of junipers to the left of the maintenance trucks that reeked of diesel fuel. She followed this juniper patch up to the left on to the loading dock. At this point I knew there were only two places to go: back to the right from where we came or just a little further to the left down from the end of the junipers and into the middle of the dock area. This is what she did and went hard left to a staircase leading down and directly back into the middle of the parking lot. As it turned out this staircase lined up directly with the “moment of truth” corner. From the stairs she went straight ahead over the corner and continued in the correct direction to the grass ahead and an opening in the fence beyond. She hesitated slightly at the fence opening but went through and came out onto a curving asphalt drive that connected two parking lots. Crossing the drive, she sniffed the weeds at the curb and continued in the vegetated area beyond. There was a fence to the right and an opening further down that the track could have meandered through to go onto another drive. Sydney could have gone right through the opening or left down a sidewalk bounding a fence directly in front, but did a 180 and turned back toward me and returned where we had come from.

Immediately after her turn back, a rabbit popped up just to the right and slightly behind her and ran under the fence. Had she seen this rabbit, she may have lost focus and not continued on track but nose down she forged on to the asphalt drive and turned right onto a sidewalk bounded on the left by pine trees. After going west again for fifteen yards she sat at the metal article. I again patted her on the head. I held up the article for the judges to see but none were in sight. Sydney restarted and again I looked back to see one of the judges come from behind the row of pine trees. While Sydney pulled ahead I again held up the article to acknowledge its retrieval. Sydney then went over a crosswalk into a grassy area before the street. She returned back from grass and onto the sidewalk which appeared to consist of granite or sandstone blocks that were four feet wide by two feet long. She tugged me down this four-foot wide walk at a brisk pace. This walk was bounded on the right by a three-foot strip of grass with a fence running down the middle of the grass. To the right was an asphalt drive. At about what turned out to be the midpoint of this last leg was an opening in the fence for a driveway. Sydney stopped and sniffed the grass at the far curb of the drive and while facing perpendicular to the leg we had been on, I looked to the right I saw the judges on the right side of the fence. Hum, I thought, this may not be good. Straight ahead down this drive was a bar gate and beyond a stairway to a lawn area in back of a school that eventually would be on our right. Did the track go straight down the right side of the fence and meander to the stairs with the last article somewhere down in the lawn? Later the judges told me that the tracklayer hugged the fence on the right and crossed over to the left and onto the grass on the left side of the walk. Our being on the left of the fence didn't present any problem to them since we were two to three feet to the left of the track and the fact that the fence was holding the scent. The grass at the curb where Sydney was checking was the point where the tracklayer made his crossover. She went back to the walk and tugged me onward. All the

while I was looking to the right into the school lawn thinking the last article may be down there. Then I went blank. What was the last article? I couldn't remember what we already had picked up. Cloth, I'm thinking. No that was the second article. Plastic, yeah that's it. About twenty feet from the end of the walk the fence joggled to the right opening up about a twelve-foot wide length of grass. Ahead, where the walk would end, was a cross fence. The track could go beyond the fence but a huge area of non-vegetated surface lay ahead. Sydney went almost to this fence and turned to the right onto the grass previously mentioned. Now going south, back toward the judges she hit the point where the fence lined up right adjacent to the sidewalk and crossed to the grass between the sidewalk and street. I happened to look down to my right and



there it was - the plastic soap saver. It was oval and clear blue blending into the grass. I took another step forward and Sydney circled to the right coming around to stand in front of the article. She didn't sit this time but I knelt down to pick it up, see the number four label on the back side, and held it high for the judges to see. Shrieks of joy went up from the judges and gallery behind while I hugged Sydney and told her what she had done. She had recovered three times and now would be known as CT Tilbury's Cinnamon Splash of Pal. Everything was right!

I have to thank the people who have laid practice tracks for us and the many volunteers who put on these tests. The opportunity to earn tracking titles would not be possible without the people who put on this test and the others in which we were entered. I would also like to thank Carolyn Krause, Orrin Eldred and Steve Ripley whose training books were invaluable in attaining this title.