

Al Sherman's Undeniable Truths Of Bloodtracking

Practice & The Real World



Al Sherman's Undeniable Truths
Second Edition
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If you're leafing through this booklet, you're either very bored, or like me you're a tracking junkie.

I grew up in tracking in a somewhat unusual way. By myself. In a vacuum. The first time I found a deer with a dog I didn't know bloodtracking was a "thing." In 1982 a friend called and asked if my Catahoula (a pet) could find a deer. I told him that I didn't know, but I'd try. Through whatever stroke of Gods grace that day she found the deer and I was hooked forever.

I honestly thought I just had a special dog that could find dead deer that were lost. I knew nothing. I had no idea there were other dogs and other handlers. All I was certain of was that I wanted that feeling of walking up on the dead animal that otherwise would not have been found again, and often. Hooked.

Even today with social media tracking is mostly word of mouth. Back in the day it was all word of mouth. Hunters talk. I got plenty of chances to learn new things and come to the slow realization that I was doing tons of things wrong. There was lots of failure, and lots of wasted time. Lots of crazy (seriously crazy) ideas about training.

As more and more young folks started calling me "Mister Al" instead of just Al, they also started asking if I'd make a list of the "undeniable truths" that I always joke about. So I finally did.

As always my disclaimer is the same: I'm NOT the man. There's no one right way. It's all about deer on the tailgate. I'm still learning. I see something new every season. It turns out there are many fabulous and talented trainer/handlers all over the country. When they talk tracking, I always shut up and listen.

This isn't a textbook, procedure, or a checklist. It's really just me babbling about tracking. If anything in here helps you in any way, I'm grateful. If not, maybe just use it to fire up the wood stove on a cool evening. I'll still be grateful!



BLURRY PIC OF ME AND BARNABY JONES. CIRCA 1985.

Undeniable Truths Of Practice

1. Keep it Real.

- Always ask yourself when you're practicing "is this something we'd encounter in the real world?" Wounded animals do some crazy, unimaginable things for sure. I've been guilty over the years of doing some ridiculous things when laying practice lines. There's no point, and it's not fair to your partner.

2. Keep it Fun.

- The absolute best thing your dog ever gets to do should be tracking. Whatever it takes. Yes, obedience is important with dogs in all things. Tracking is a team event. The dog should absolutely love its work.

3. All practice is training. All training is practice.

- If your dog is killing it, you're practicing. If not, you're practicing training. You're both observing, and learning whether you make a correction/help the dog, or not. Always take the opportunity to read, feel, and bond with your dog.

4. The best practice track is a real track.

- There is simply no substitute for the energy, and scent trail of an actual wounded animal. After a season your dog will know the difference. He'll continue to learn and develop his style and technique for years to come. Take your dog tracking!

4a. All tracking can be training or practice.

- Help your dog in the real world if you can and it's necessary.

5. You know your dog better than anyone.

- If you don't, you should. Always attempt to read your dog. Even when he's just sniffing around the yard. I encourage seeking advice from experienced handler/trainers. Your instinct about your dog is correct.

5a. Your read in the real world will never be good enough.

- The best way to trust your dog is to know he's right. Always work on your reads. I encourage you to run at least one or two blind tracks during every off season. There's no better way to work on, or confirm your reads during practice.

6. You can't hide from your dog.

- But try your best in practice. It's not just verbal or physical. Dogs are very energy sensitive. Try as hard as you can in practice to not influence the dog. It's very important that they know they can do this without help, and don't rely on you.

7. Your dog needs exercise and stimulation beyond practice.

- Your dogs job is seasonal. Unemployment for working dog can be torture. Conditioning is important for those 4 track days in November. Exercise him. Train. Play. Daily if possible.

8. It's never good enough.

- This is normal. You worry because you care. I've never come home from a practice track thinking it was perfect, or flawless. It's a good thing but don't let it make you crazy. Just ask yourself the question: "Would my dog have recovered this deer on a real track if I didn't know the line?"

9. Network.

- With the internet and social media your just a text, or PM away from the most experienced and talented handlers in the country. The vast majority of them would be delighted to give advice to someone that is working hard to get good. They can shallow, and shorten the learning curve immeasurably.

10. Just do it.

- Sometimes you just don't feel like it. Lay and run your practice track. You'll be glad you did.

11. It ain't rocket science, but you can't cheat the grind.

- If I can do it anyone can. Seriously. You'll meet folks that for whatever reason want to make you think that you and/or your dog just aren't "special" enough. It's simply not true. You can train a serviceable tracking dog. Maybe even a great one. But it won't just happen. It takes work and commitment.

12. No time in the woods behind your dog is wasted.

- Every time you track with your dog the team is bonding. Your dog is smelling new things. The team is developing styles, and techniques. Most of all for you, you're learning what your dog is telling you. Always ask yourself what your dog is doing/telling you.

13. Train how you fight.

- Do you track in the cold? Heat? Nighttime? Rain? Snow? What equipment does the dog always wear? What lead and harness? What is your procedure to get to the track and begin? Practice for the actual event.

14. Train for the hard ones.

- We all want our dogs to succeed and look good in practice. I feel this too. Making practice tracks simulate the occasional difficult real world track makes the average tracks that much easier. Think of the dog swinging a weighted bat in the on deck circle during the off season. That bat will feel much lighter when he gets up to the plate. If every practice track is perfect you're making them too easy.

15. Always make your dog indicate the target.

- The track isn't over until your dog sticks his nose on the target. There are real world tracks when you will need him to do this or you won't see the deer.

16. Let your dog go for a bit when he misses.

- This is about reading your dog. Are you noticing a prominent theme? Expect your dog to miss on a hard practice check. This is your chance to learn and/or confirm your read. How does your dog tell you that he's not smelling the target scent? Is he searching? Reacquiring? Just screwing around? Or is he tracking the wrong scent?

17. Help your dog when necessary, but DO NOT make them dependent.

- It's practice. Your dog may need help. You know the line. It's perfectly normal to help, but be careful. Use it only when absolutely necessary and taper it as the dog gets better. The ultimate goal is that your dog develops its own technique and style, and feels free to think on his own. Give him a chance to figure it out on his own.

18. Our dogs get great in spite of us.

- This is the good news. It's not an excuse to try to cheat the grind. I'm just letting you know that even if you aren't the dog whisperer, you can train a decent tracking dog if you're willing to put in the work.

19. There's NO one right way.

- I'm sure there are experienced handlers that will disagree with things I say, or methods I use. Some may even think I'm nuts. It's all good. Their dogs find deer. My dogs find deer. I'm always willing to learn. You should be too.

20. Use video.

- This is a relatively new undeniable truth. Back in the day I didn't own, and/or never carried a camera. In the last few years new handlers have asked to see videos of my practice tracks. Watching videos of these tracks gives me unlimited numbers of views of the dogs' body language. Reading the dog is SO huge. Having a video to watch over and over cuts down on this learning curve.



Jumpin' Jack Flash
My one true Superstar
2002-2016

Undeniable Truths Of Bloodtracking

1. Never say never. Never say always.
 - Most folks say my #2 should be #1. I see something new every season. This rule covers every other rule. It also works in life.

2. Trust your dog.
 - Seriously. Trust your dog. It's so simple but encompasses so much of what we do, and plays into so many of these truths. This trust grows through time and hard work. Trust but verify also applies. Even superstars need help occasionally. In the absence of any other information, trust your dog.

3. It's all about deer on the tailgate.
 - You'll constantly run into people who say you're doing it wrong. Always be willing to listen and maybe learn something. If you're recovering deer and don't have overwhelming evidence that you're leaving a lot of dead deer in the woods, you're not doing it wrong.

4. Train how you fight.
 - Make your training tracks simulate the real world.

- 4a. Train for the hard ones.
 - Try to include difficult real world checks in your practice.

5. Take the time to mark last blood.
 - You won't find it again. Seriously, you won't. Mark it physically and on your GPS.

6. Drop a pin at the truck.
 - Seriously. Do this. Trust me. You're welcome.

7. You can't know unless you go.
 - New handlers often call to ask if I'd take a particular track. What they're really asking is if I think the deer is dead. My answer is usually yes as far as going. I only screen for distance during the rut when I'm just physically unable to take them all. The phone interview is important, but nothing close to what the dog will tell you. Don't sweat numbers or percentages. I honestly don't think even experienced handlers can screen for dead deer effectively on the phone. Take the call. You're a tracking dog handler.

8. Don't let the hunters make you crazy. They'll try.
 - We can't do what we love if hunters don't call us. The vast majority are good guys that are in a bad spot. It's important to them to find their deer. They're stressed and may be in denial about how bad a shot they made. We can all tell stories about this for hours on end. Be nice, non critical, and non judgmental. It's YOUR track from start to finish. It's YOUR track until you're driving away. Run your track.
 - 8a. The hunter is usually the only eyewitness, and he sucks.
 - The time from when the hunter pulls the trigger, or releases the arrow, or bolt and the deer being out of sight can be seconds. Things happen fast and adrenaline is flowing. Listen carefully. Sift out what is important. Then trust your dog. He's gathering information that nobody can see.

8a1. When the hunter tells you where he hit the deer, draw a 3 foot circle around that spot. It's somewhere in there. Maybe.

-Sometimes they're 100% correct. Sometimes they're wrong in ways that don't even seem possible. Believe what you see, and what the dog tells you.

8b. The hunter does not know your dog as well as you do.

-Don't let the hunter tell you what he thinks your dog is doing. Read your dog. Trust your dog. Run your track.

- Repeat after me: "He looks like he's tracking to me. I'm gonna just follow him for a little while."

9. All tracking is training.

- The team is always learning and working on technique. If your dog needs help and you are able, help (train) him.

10. Tracking isn't world peace and you ain't Mother Teresa.

- You're performing a service. An act of kindness. You love it, and it feels good. You may even be addicted. Don't let it consume the rest of your life. Don't let it hurt relationships, or you (or the dog) physically or mentally.

You CAN say no.

11. No time behind your dog in the woods is wasted.

- Your team is forever bonding, learning, and improving. Always confirm and strengthen your reads. I see something new every year. So does my dog.

12. Your dogs best track does not necessarily include a recovery.
- Most of the deer we track are not dead. If my dog follows an invisible line for 2 miles and then shows me a drop of blood I'm proud of my read and the dogs tracking. Most of these can be considered great tracks even though we failed to recover the hunters' animal.

13. Always consider the possibility that the hunter pushed the deer.
- They'll be positive they didn't. They believe this. But they did.

14. Don't get cocky. The tracking Gods WILL catch up to you.
- If you flip a coin 10 times you may get heads ten times. Sooner or later you'll be back to 50%. Tracking seems to go in streaks. I don't know why. You may recover 10 in a row. Sooner or later the percentages will ring true. Stay humble.

14a. Run your dog. Not your mouth.
- We all love our dogs. We're all fiercely proud of our dogs. You are awesome, and so is your dog. Just stop it. Let your work speak for itself.

15. Give your dog enough time and distance.
- Be careful not to convince yourself that the deer isn't dead. Do one more run. Search areas that you haven't looked at. Go a little farther on the run your dog takes more than once. I'm not saying to stay all day. You'll always think more about the non recoveries. Cut out some more of the second guessing.

16. When the tracking Gods catch up to you, it ISN'T your dog.
- I get calls all the time from new handlers that found ten in a row and then went 0 for 12. They want to know what's wrong with their dog. Nothing. It's just the streaky nature of tracking and the percentages working themselves out. Carry on.

17. All hunters track too soon. lots of handlers track too soon.

- With hunters it's undeniable. With handlers it's a little more controversial. I get that. In spite of Coyote or Wolf issues I just don't see the point of jumping a live deer on leash with no weapons. If the deer is dead now, it'll be dead when we get there.

18. If you're tracking to make money, please rethink or forget this.

- Do it because you love it. If you end up with some cash in your pocket, great. In the long run you'll have a lot more money, a lot more free time, and be a lot less beat to death if you just get a second minimum wage job. There simply aren't enough hunters that can afford what you'd need to charge to make it worthwhile when you consider everything.

19. Always make/allow your dog to track to and indicate the dead deer.

- This is mandatory for me. Even if the hunters have already spotted it and are high giving over their trophy. There WILL be a time when you'll need your dog to do this.

20. Restarts are normal.

- They just are. The best dog I've ever had would occasionally miss a turn, or bite on an interesting hot trail and not correct. It happens. I explain this to the hunters before the track. It doesn't discourage me on the track.

21. Moisture helps scent.

- I don't know why, but take this to the bank. Hunters don't know this and they tend to freak out when it rains on the line. Many new handlers don't trust, or believe this. When they track a bunch they will. You won't have as much (or any) visual confirmation that your dog is correct. This is a drag for even the most experienced handlers who'll admit it. But your dog will appreciate the extra help.

22. Take the extra time to be sure your dog is on the target scent at the start.

- Many (most?) seasoned/finished dogs don't need it. They can pick out a wounded deers scent line almost immediately. It's more for YOUR confidence level.

23. It's all about the dog.

- We all love our dogs. Remember this and don't let your excitement to track hurt your partner. Most of these dogs will work for as long as we ask them. Even if they're injured, overheated, dehydrated, or just exhausted. Don't let this happen. Please make sure the animal is dead before you let your dog walk up on it, if and when possible.

- Tracking is a team event. You need each other. Let's face it, your dog would be a lot more successful by himself than you would by yourself. Try it sometime. Go out and help a hunter track a deer he can't find. Don't bring your dog. You'll be stunned how hard it seems without your partner.

24. You're gonna leave a dead deer in the woods.

- It's the worst follow up news you can get. It hurts. I'd tell you to get over it, but you won't. I still think about deer I left in the woods 20 years ago. Think about it, and learn what you can. But press on. Never forget that you're doing a good thing. A service. The hunter called you because he can't find his deer. Tracking isn't an algorithm. There are variables we don't ever know about. It bothers you this much because you care.

24a. It's most likely your fault.

- Not enough time and distance. Misreading and pulling your dog. I could go on, and on. Just learn from it what you can.

24a1. But...

Dogs DO have bad days. Even the superstars. Who knows why? Babe Ruth struck out more than any other hitter in history. Scent is a crazy concept that I don't believe we fully understand. I've seen a dog trot down a 48 hour old line step for step without putting his nose on the ground. I've seen the same dog act as if there was nothing to smell on an 8 hour line that went 400 yards. It happens.

24a2. However...

Your team may not have left a dead deer in the woods at all. Home range deer stay in their home range. Every single year I get at least one call from a hunter who found the deer that we tracked. These deer are quite often found near, or even very near the ground that we tracked and/or searched. I can tell story after story about deer we saw, pushed, or jumped very much alive when we finally called the track, found dead days, weeks, or months later within 500 yards of where we stopped. I'm not trying to give you a built in excuse. You will leave a dead deer in the woods. I'm just saying that in many of these instances, though it may be hard to convince the hunter. You didn't.

These truths are not meant to be any kind of tracking gospel. There will be handlers who think I'm a fool. They may be correct. There have been, and will continue to be additions and subtractions over the years. I hope at least they promote discussion. This is how we all continue to learn. If I've helped you in any small way I'm grateful. If not, thank you for taking the time. I'm very proud to be part of this community. You're all doing a very good thing.

Your Dog Catches Frisbees?



Cool Story Bro.

The Hunter Interview

Why interview the hunter at all? You're bringing the dog.

Why not just let the dog show, and tell you everything you need to know? True. You could do it that way but I haven't met any handler that does. Some spend 10 minutes on the phone on the side of the road. Others do an hour long interrogation. For most it's somewhere in between.

I'm gathering as much information as I can. Some is very practical. Where are you hunting? Most of it is meant to answer one basic question to determine wait time, and to get an idea of how you'll be conducting the track.

The main questions I'm trying to answer are these: If this deer died, how did it die? When did it die, or most likely be dead?

Before we start I make it clear to the hunter that: " Nothing I say, or do now, or while we're tracking is meant to be critical or judgmental. I just want to help you find your deer. Please help me help you by telling me the truth as you remember it. "I don't know" is a better answer than guessing."

Most hunters can be slightly embarrassed that they can't find their deer. I find that this statement goes a long way toward putting them at ease, and helps to get better answers.

- Where are you hunting?

There's no point in going much farther if he's out of your range. Direct him to the Find A Tracker link, give him a referral, or continue to try to help him verbally.

- What time did you shoot the deer?
When did our wait time clock start?

- Where do you think you hit the deer?

- What was the deers angle to you at the shot?

- What was the distance of the shot?

- Were you elevated, or on the ground?

- What size gun?

- Fixed blade or Mechanical?

- What was the deers reaction at the shot?

- How long/far did you see him?

- What did you do after the shot?

How clean is my line? Was the deer jumped, or pushed?
Was there a follow up shot that may have been successful?

- What did you find at the hit site?

Blood quality is more important than quantity. Hair?
Length? Color? Bone? Stomach matter?

- If archery: Do you have the arrow/bolt?

Anything on it? Where? Any smell?

Please save the arrow/bolt and don't clean it.

- Do you have any pictures of anything you can send me?

- If you found blood where was it? Straight down? Out a certain side, or both? Were there smears? Which side? How high?

- What did you do when you got to last blood?

- How far and long did you grid search for the next spot?

How many people?

- Did you mark anything?

- What is the terrain like?

- Is there any chance at all, even in the deepest recesses of your mind that you may have seen, pushed, or jumped the deer while you tracked?

- Have you spoken to any other trackers.

This can be important. Hunters DO double book for whatever reason. It's super annoying, and something to always try to avoid.

- Decide on a wait time. Get an address where you can meet to track.

The very last thing I say to every hunter: "I'm coming with the dog. I'll see you at that address at that time. You have to give me your word that you'll completely stay out of the area and away from the scent line until we arrive. I'm very serious about this. Will you give me your word?"

As always these interview ideas are just mine. There are surely handlers that'll say I'm nuts. It's all good. Use everything, anything, or nothing as you see fit. Develop a style that works for you. After a few hundred interviews you'll start to see constants. You'll develop the ability to (in most cases) quickly understand what you're dealing with and what the plan should be.

