

A Day in the Search Log

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Our search and rescue dog unit is spread all over California, and we only train together as a unit once a month; then it's a big weekend workout in the Sierra high country or the Santa Cruz redwoods, or some point in-between, often with a simulated search exercise involving the local sheriff's department, volunteer mounted and Jeep posses, and others.

How about the rest of the time? How do beginning handlers get their dogs through the first steps in training, and intermediate teams progress toward being mission-ready? How do the teams who are already on search call-out keep up their maintenance training and also work on more advanced skills?

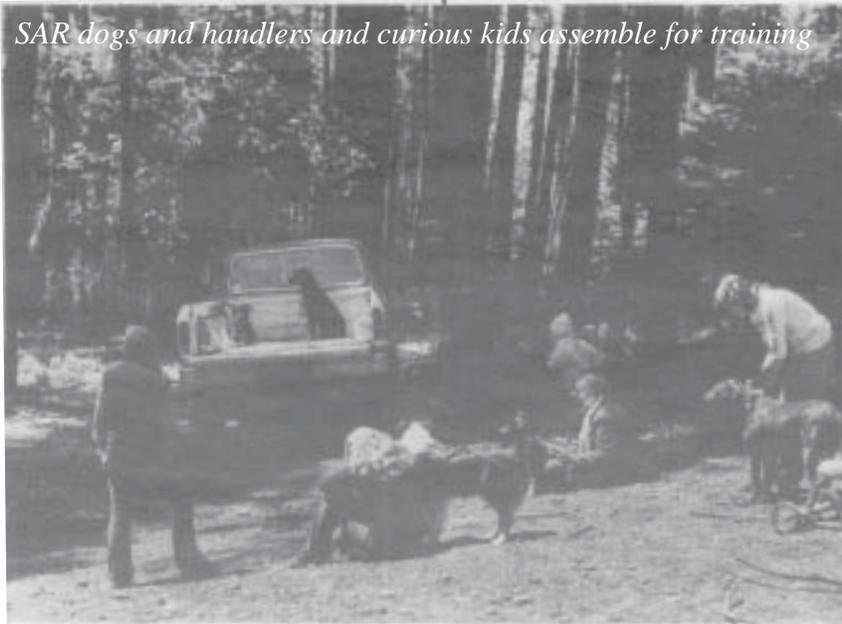
In our local areas, we get together once or twice a week to help each other train. The advanced handlers help direct and train the less experienced, but the beginners pay their "dues," too. Everyone takes a turn being "victim."

The number fluctuates. Some prospective handlers drop out after they discover how much time they have to put in, or because their dogs aren't progressing as fast as they'd like. In our own county, there have been times when it was just my husband Hatch and me. My dogs, "Sardy" and "Roxy," must have gotten tired of just finding Hatch; likewise, his dog, "Pepper," must have thought, "Oh, no, not Mom again!" And then, all of a sudden, there were five enthusiastic new recruits and their dogs, all gung-ho to train. Not only on weekends but during the week, too.

A typical Wednesday afternoon training session might go something like this: Three pickups and a van

arrive at the dead end of Terry's road in the Sly Park foothills outside Placerville. Neighborhood kids come to see what's going on, and become part of the scene. We take a few minutes socializing dogs. A couple of the

SAR dogs and handlers and curious kids assemble for training



newest-comer canines haven't met many dogs and people before, and the first order of business is to get them comfortable around strangers of both species. We may do a few minutes of group obedience; we not only handle our own dogs, but then pass dogs around so they get used to performing for others as well. Then on to search business. First comes "Bree," a bright

little mixed Shepherd, 5 months old, who's been playing hide-and-seek with us for a couple of months now. She knows the game very well, so we're working on making the problems longer and more complicated. Today, that means she has to bulldoze her way through mountain misery as tall as she is, with almost zero wind, to find her victim, a woman named Terry. Bree is persistent, and when she arrives, she sees to it that she gets her favorite reward, chewing on Terry's fingers (One of our other aims in Bree's training, right now, is to direct those happy puppy teeth from fingers to sticks, or rags, or almost anything else

After Bree, we work her littermate "Saber." Saber is cool. He gives the impression he's never had to work for a living. When his handler, Cindy, disappears, he's quick to find her, but I suspect the rest of the world could get lost and he'd be happy enough to sit at Cindy's feet and watch the grass grow. We're still trying to find something that gives Saber an incentive to get up and go find somebody.

Next comes "Sadie." A year-old Australian Shep-

herd, Sadie is a newcomer to the group. She's one of the dogs that needs socializing, but already she's made progress. It's hard to be aloof and worried when so many other dogs are having so much fun! We start off with having her owner, Regina, run off to hide behind a tree. Sadie makes like a jackrabbit through the mountain misery, after her. The jackrabbit-hops go really high every time she catches a whiff of scent. Sadie's doing so well that we try her on a victim played by a stranger to her, Bonnie. It's still a runaway; Bonnie talks excitedly to Sadie, then runs off, still calling her name. No problem. Sadie finds, then whips around to get Regina. This little dog has an instinct for the refind. For Sadie, lots of pats and praise are all the reward for which she could ask - especially that bottom rub! Sadie is so happy she forgets her victim was a stranger; she gives Bonnie a kiss.



"Spooner" checks out a slash pile on the edge of the meadow as he searches for the victim.

While we work with Sadie, Cindy goes off to hide for Terry's dog, "Spooner." Spooner is an energetic 3-year-old Lab mix who's been in SAR training for about 2-1/2 months. Searching comes easy for Spooner, but the refind has been a problem. You can always tell when Spooner's made a find; he stops searching. Not good enough. Spooner needs to lead Terry to that victim, who might be hidden in dense brush. Or it might be nighttime. And then having found and re-found that person - if it's not the one who's missing, he has to go on searching for the right one. 'Spooner's been doing better at the

refind lately. When Spooner trots back, leading his handler and victim, Terry's grin says it all. "Why weren't you with us?" she yells. "He did perfect. Super refind!"

Now Cindy drops her jacket on a stump and she and Terry hike off down the road. They're 10 split up in a meadow about a quarter mile down. Then, after I've helped a couple more handlers with their dogs, I'll work my own young Shepherd, "Roxy," on a scent discrimination problem to find Cindy.

Next we work 9-month-old Rottweilers "Deja" and "Jessie." They're littermates, owned by next door neighbors Bonnie and Dell, and they're brand new at searching. For them, we set up runaway games: Dell hides for Bonnie's pup, Deja, and Bonnie hides for Jessie. This has the advantage that both girls are finding someone they know and like, and their own handlers can get the feel of handling them. When each of the Rotties has had three or four of these short problems, I go back to "base camp" by our vehicles for Roxy. I tell her "Go find Cindy," and she ranges through the area where we've all been hiding, checking all the scents, until she finds Cindy's jacket. "Good girl, track Cindy." She's off down the road now, way out ahead on Cindy's trail. At least, she should be on Cindy's trail and not Terry's. Out in the meadow where Cindy and Terry split up, Roxy gets a good, solid airscent and is off at a gallop, head high. In the distance I see her leaping at the back porch of a little cabin in the meadow. Finally managing to reach her victim, she gives a quick lick in the face, then races back, does a 180-degree turn in front of me, and whips back to the porch, so proud to show me Cindy. Her reward is a game of stick keep away; she races up and down the meadow with her prize just out of our reach, until Terry comes out of hiding to join us.

Bonnie and Regina have been following behind me and Roxy on our scent discrimination problem. Part of their training as handlers will be to watch more advanced teams work, either as observers following along or as victims. They'll learn tactics of airscent and trailing search; they'll learn about scent behavior in different weather and terrain; they'll learn to "read" other dogs, and this will all help them as their own dogs progress in training.

Now we send Bonnie out through the meadow and Regina up the wooded ridge behind to hide for Spooner and for my older Shepherd, Sardy. Back at the vehicles, we start Spooner and Sardy together on a hasty-search. Often, on real searches, two dog teams may start out down a road together on the way to assignments farther out from base. The dogs should be searching all the way,

and shouldn't be distracted by another dog close-by. This is a new experience for Spooner, but Sardy is all business, and the Lab soon settles into his job. He reaches the meadow first, working many scents. "Go for it," I tell Terry, and direct Sardy up toward the ridge where Regina went through the mountain misery, up a little draw, and then onto a dirt road. Here Sardy's nose goes down and her pace picks up. She's soon far ahead up the road and out of sight. Presently she comes back, giving the familiar shake of her head and pirouette that means "Hurry up, I found her!" Around a couple of trees, down a little trail, and there's Sardy dancing up and down beside her victim and already tossing the stick she's chosen for her tug-o-war reward. Regina apologizes. "I did everything I could think of to throw her off," she says.

With Sardy still brandishing her stick, we all head downhill and stand at the edge of the meadow. Terry and Spooner are still searching. After minutes later he re-emerges, leading his handler and victim.

"He tried to go down there before," Terry admits, "but I could hear all those kids at the camp across the way, and I *knew* Bonnie wouldn't hide over in that direction." Never trust a victim. Terry is just beginning to understand that training her dog to find, and re-find, is only part of becoming a SAR dog handler. Learning how to work him on actual problems, and coming to believe him, will be the real challenge.

One last dog to work, Dell's older Rottweiler bitch, "Sam." I've already suggested to Dell that, in the next week or two, she choose between training Sam and Jessie. "One dog at a time is plenty," I told her. "You can't devote the time and attention to more than one dog if you're training up for search. You have to get to know that dog very, very well." I explain that Sardy was fully qualified, a 6-year-old veteran of many searches, when I started training Roxy in her puppyhood. Roxy would become my backup search dog and will finally replace Sardy when the "old lady" has to be retired. Dell does three runaways for Sam with neighbor Bonnie acting as handler. Back at "base camp" I count noses. "Terry

gone?" "Yup," says Cindy. There's Terry's jacket, lying in the midst of dogs, puppies, and people. Cindy adds, "Think Pepper can find her?"

Pepper is Hatch's dog, but to keep peace in the family - when he's at work earning money to finance our searching - sometimes I work his dog. If I don't, she screams and hollers and pouts. "Track. Terry," I say, pointing to the jacket. Pepper gives it a passing glance, makes a quick circle of base camp, and heads uphill. Should I believe her? We've had six people and nine other dogs all through this area for three hours, and it didn't look like Pepper even sniffed Terry's jacket. I call her back and make a point of showing her the jacket. "Sure, Mom," she seems to think, and she heads back uphill the way she went before. Well, I'd better follow her considering what I've been telling our trainees about believing their dogs. Sure enough, the next little ridge over scrunched in under a dead tree, is Terry. For her reward, Pepper tries to carry the tree back. Back at base, we review what the various dogs have done that afternoon, and what kinds of problems their handlers should set up in the next few days. Some of us will be working together over by Regina's place on Sand Ridge on Saturday; we'll all get together again in Sly Park next Wednesday.

On the drive home, I have lots to think about: Where 10 different dogs and their handlers are in training, what they need, and how to fit it all into a few hours a week; where my own dogs are and what they need. I'm thinking, "For Roxy, next time, a moving victim. Or maybe somebody buried under brush, so she has to dig and 'tell me.'" Today, for a whole afternoon in the field, our own girls had less than an hour's work among the three of them. But it was quality time. They got to find some new people. They had a chance to sort out their victims' scents from a lot of other people and dogs. For all the hours we'd spent on actual missions lately, searching for bodies in burned-out buildings, or looking for a small child who turns up miles away at a relative's house, our dogs deserve a few good, live finds. That's their best reward.