

The Thinking Dog

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Example: When SAR dog teams responded to help look for a body in the Santa Cruz Mountains of California, deputies had already delineated the area they wanted searched. While the handlers were being briefed and readying their gear, one of the dogs, off command, took off into the woods. Reappearing a few minutes later, he led his handler down the slope - to the body. It wasn't in the area to be searched.

Example: A handler laid a trail one evening and returned the next morning with her dog to run it. She worked her Shepherd off-lead. Halfway through the trail, the dog suddenly turned aside, up a bank, and started nosing in the bushes. After bunnies? The handler trusted her dog and went to investigate. There, face down in the sand, was a young man apparently trying to make it through a bad hangover (he refused help and soon made it out to the road on his own power.) The search dog had recognized a situation that didn't fit her run-of-the-mill training, and she responded to it by leaving her handler's familiar trail to air-scent a higher priority "victim."

Example: There was no good scent article for the missing hiker, and lots of other people had trampled over the area, destroying footprints and leaving scent everywhere. How to find a clue that would provide a direction to start searching? Two of the SAR dogs headed uphill—the way it was later found that the lost hiker had gone. Handlers theorize their dogs were discriminating not for him, but for the smell of adrenalin he left as he tried to find his way out.

Example: After two boys disappeared and were presumed drowned on a canoeing trip several years ago, a SAR dog unit was called in to search (see DOG SPORTS, December, 1984). While other teams worked the shore of the reservoir, looking for sign that the boys might have made it to land—or for their bodies washed up on shore—one dog and handler went out in a boat to search the reservoir itself. The dog hadn't been trained for this. Promising nothing, the handler agreed to have a go at it.

He ran into some difficulties. What command to use when you want your dog to actively search while standing motionless in a boat? How to know when the dog scents a body he can't physically "find." The dog's previous disaster and avalanche training had application, but this was still a novel situation. (It worked. In several hundred acres of water 60 to 70 feet deep, the dog pinpointed within 5 yards of where the bodies later surfaced.)

Search dogs sometimes perform beyond their training. We believe we've seen dogs apply what they've learned in one situation to a quite different situation. We also think we've seen them make training progress while they were actually "on vacation." We believe they were thinking, in between their training, about their favorite game, Search.

Do dogs think? That may be a question of Semantics. In any case, the more different things we teach our dogs, and the more different situations we expose them to, the more they seem to apply what they already know to new situation.

This isn't to say we can prepare them for everything they might encounter on a search. That sounds good in theory, but it isn't quite realistic. If we knew all the rules and anomalies in search

work, we might not need our dogs.

But we can provide our dogs with tools and principles.

Principles first.

Motivation. Finding people is what search dogs are all about, and what they dream about while they're off-duty. A dog who's truly motivated to find people will keep searching even when the rules change. Beyond that first principle, everything else is conditioning and refinement.

Responsibility. Dog and handler need to come to an understanding: sometimes the dog knows best. He can override his handler if it means finding that lost person. He'll be alert to a "find" situation even when he's off-command - for instance, riding with his handler in the back of a pickup to their search assignment, or hiking back in when they're done. Beyond that, he'll even switch from one mode to another - say, from "track" command to airscent search - on his own authority. Some handlers have trouble accepting this, and their dogs consequently have trouble accepting the responsibility.

Adaptability. Search and rescue isn't an obedience competition. The dog may have to apply techniques he learned in one situation to a different situation (for instance, the water search we mentioned earlier), and the handler will have to be able to figure out what his dog is doing. This is where some of the tools come in.

One tool a handler provides his off-lead area-search dog is the refind. After making the find, the dog races back to his handler, "tells" him he's found, and leads the handler in to the victim. The "telling" can take a variety of forms: staring at the handler, grabbing his sleeve or pantsleg, circling him or doing a little dance in front of him, and then leading him directly in, maybe with a nuzzle or lick in the face for the victim.

What happens when the dog can't reach the victim - for instance, someone buried under debris from an earthquake, avalanche or other disaster? For situations like these, the handler provides his dog with different tools for "telling." In an avalanche, dogs learn to dig through the snow to try to uncover the victim's face; the digging signals the find to the handler. In disasters involving debris the dog can't dig through he learns to scratch and grab at pieces of rubble. And because he's not likely to be able to uncover his victim, he learns to whine, squeal or bark. It's an expression of frustration, but also an audible signal for the handler who may be directing his dog, from a safer distance, over the unstable debris.

Other tools the handler develops in his dog are the agility and confidence to negotiate slick, sharp or moving debris, logs, boulders, brush and rock scree, as well as the endurance to keep searching for long



Motivation is the key. With a happy whoop, this SAR dog signals that she's found her "victim" in a tree. Now, she'll return for a refind, and lead her handler in.



Anybody home? SAR dogs learn to find their victims in all sorts of places, and on all footing.

Photos by the authors.

periods, and to follow up on an elusive scent. Conditioning and work over obstacles are important.

The dog who has these skills, along with the motivation to find people any where and any way, will have the edge over the dog whose training has been strictly regimented toward a single type of search. If the presumed “drowned body” is sitting, very much alive, beside the creek instead of lodged dead underwater, the dog can leave his water search mode and happily do a refind. If he can’t reach the small child who crawled into the center of a berry thicket, he’ll apply some of the tools he learned in disaster search; he’ll bark and squeal until his handler understands. By making

your training flexible and varied, and keeping your dog motivated to find, you may discover you have a partner who thinks for himself - and for you.