Watch Your Dog!

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Q: When is a train wreck disaster sort of like an avalanche, but not quite like that, either? **A**: When the train was carrying sodium carbonate, or something else you never anticipated in training your dog, The SAR dogs and handlers that responded to the San Bernardino train derailment (see August, 1989, Dog Sports) are among CARDA's most seasoned disaster teams. The handlers have worked with their dogs for years, developing careful agility, thorough search coverage, and an unmistakable barking/ digging disaster alert. So, when the dogs gave a couple of perfunctory woofs and then set to digging in the soda ash that spilled from the train's hopper cars, their handlers waited for the bark that would really tell them "Here he is!" It never came. The dogs just kept scratching and pawing in the ash, digging and digging.

A typical avalanche alert, right? Most U.S. avalanche dog handlers train their dogs to put their energy into trying to reach a victim trapped under snow. If the dog actually makes contact, so much the better; he may open an airway for a buried survivor. Contrast this with disaster search, where the debris is generally too tough for a dog to make much progress, and he shows his frustration by barking. A handler standing at a safe distance, possibly out of sight of the dog, hears the barking and knows the dog has something. What the dogs were doing in San Bernardino was very like an avalanche alert. But it wasn't an avalanche alert, either - at least not for those particular dogs. One dog has had only one avalanche problem in her career - hardly enough to develop an "avalanche alert." The other dog has learned to give an alert more typical of many European avalanche dogs: To bark as well as dig for an under-snow find. Hence the handlers' puzzlement.

She thought she knew

"After nine years I thought I knew what this dog was going to do," commented Shirley Hammond, whose red Doberman, "Cinnamon," first alerted on the survivor buried under tons of steel, wood, house debris and soda ash. "But every time you think you know, you learn some thing new." San Bernardino wasn't the first time Cinnamon has taught her handler "something new."

In the summer of 1985, Shirley and Cinnamon were among the CARDA teams responding to the remote Calaveras County property where as many as 25 people may have been tortured and killed. In one location, Peggy Emrey's German Shepherd, "Brinna," "... was kind of poking around and looking down in the mountain misery, and then she'd look back to Peggy." In fact, all of the dogs poked in the dense ground cover, then turned and looked at their handlers. It was Peggy who first figured out what was going on, Shirley says. Where the dogs "alerted," the handlers found tiny fragments of charred human bone.

"The dogs didn't know how to alert," Shirley explains, "because they'd never been taught to alert on burned bone. They didn't want to take their bringsel, they didn't want to dig, they didn't want to bark. So they stood there and conveyed their frustrations. It was some on-the-spot handler training," she concludes.

Shirley is right. Handlers, like their dogs, should always be in training. If they're attuned to their dogs' body language, the dogs may teach them things they never suspected.

Years ago in Virginia, two teenage boys were missing and presumed drowned somewhere in the Occoquan Reservoir. Could search dogs help indicate where to put the divers?

The handlers didn't know. They didn't know if dogs could scent through water. They'd only done "wilderness" search for people missing in the woods and mountains, and some disaster and avalanche training. A handler took his dog out in a john boat and just watched the dog. The dog's sniffing, turn of the head and biting at the water gave the best guess on where the boys' bodies might be.

The dog was right, of course. The two bodies later surfaced within 5 yards of the dog's alert.

Since then, SAR dogs have earned a reputation for locating bodies underwater. In many of the early cases, the dogs had no specific water search training; success came because the handlers watched their dogs' behavior very carefully and were able to read the dogs' alerts, which were often very subtle for drowning victims.

Too much obedience?

Every now and then handlers Write in or tell us about their dogs doing something "different" to indicate a find, behaving in a manner they'd never seen in training. A dog who's always been quiet may suddenly vocalize. A dog who's been trained to do a refind will stay with the victim and bark. A dog who's been trained to bark will do something else instead. And the handler will be nonplused. A lot of us have T- shirts that read "Believe Your Dog," "Trust Your Dog," and so forth. The reason we have these T-shirts is because we need them.

One of the things that gets us in

trouble, and makes us reluctant to believe our dogs, may be too much reliance on precision obedience train- ing. We say this with a great deal of caution, because we don't want handlers to seize on it and quit doing any kind of positive work with their dogs.

We don't mean to imply that a search dog shouldn't come when called, heel, stay, down, drop on recall, and follow a lot of other useful commands. But precision obedience can result in the handler training a behavior in the dog which the hanIdler then comes to expect in a search

situation. As in San Bernardino, it may not happen.

Much better for the dog to train the handler in its whole range of reactions, so the handler won't mistake anyone of a number of responses the dog may use to indicate a live, dead or injured find. You can't learn to read your dog through training alone.

You can't possibly create all of the situations in training that you may encounter in the real world. For example, unless we have body parts to train on - including tiny fragments of charred bone; unless we have combinations of live and dead victims, and seriously injured persons, we can't train for all the possibilities. Even if we had all those things, the next search would probably present something we hadn't thought of.

Broaden your experience

Still, training is important. Try to I put your dog and yourself in as many dif-

ferent situations as you can. Even if you think you'll never respond to an avalanche, for instance, try to do avalanche work. If you don't have enough snow for a safe avalanche training, simulate a "soft" burial with sheets or blankets or something else.

And then round out the training with actual searches, many times a year: In wilderness, in backyards, in water, for cadavers. Learn to read your dog's reactions under many different conditions.

In order to read your dog, you have to be able to see your dog. This isn't always feasible or safe in an actual search situation, especially in disaster search. But if it's feasible and safe, it's the way to go. There are cases where a bark - or the lack of a bark - doesn't tell the whole story. So, while a disaster bark alert is clearly desirable, don't count on it to mean everything. Learn to watch and read your dog.

A dog working out of sight could bark at a trapped dog or cat, or because he himself is stuck, or for some other reason that doesn't signal a human victim. Or the dog may not bark, even if there's someone there.

An Austrian team reports that one of its life-saving disaster finds was made after a handler observed his dog pricking its ears, listening. Neither this dog nor follow-up dogs alerted with the bark they'd been trained to give; apparently they never caught the victim's scent. The bur-

ied man was unconscious, and because of the thick cement dust permeating the rubble, his breathing was labored enough for the dog to hear. Sound sensing devices were brought in and confirmed the sound - and the man was brought out alive. Fortunate for him that the handler was carefully watching his dog and believed what he saw.

New field opened

The Occoquan Reservoir search for the drowned teenagers came at a time when the handler had no background in water search. The dog had no water search training, and his handler had no way of knowing what the dog might do in that situation. But by reading the dog, by being attuned to the dog's behavior, he helped open up a new field of SAR dog work. ("What, dogs smell through water? Impossible!") We say this was done without previous training. Water training, that is. There had been lots of training, early training, continuous training in finding lost people. Through search training, the well-motivated SAR dog becomes obsessed with finding people.

But the way the dog reacts to the find may not be specifically the way he was trained to react, and may not be at all what the handler expects.

As Shirley Hammond concludes, "The dogs are full of surprises. They're teaching us all the time, and if you're not learning from them, you're going to be tripped up!"

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