

## Using the right tool for the job – Search Dogs

By Don Stephens

As a search manager, it is critical that you understand the resources you call on to perform various tasks within a search and rescue (SAR) situation. Canines (search dogs) are frequently used but not always understood in many search situations. There are three general classes of search dogs from which all types of search dogs are classed.

The first type of search dog is the “air scent” or “area” dog. The second type is a “tracking” dog. The third type is a “trailing” dog. Regardless of the task, be it live find, human remains detection (HRD), arson, bomb, or drug dog; all canines will fall into one or more of these classifications. Some air scent dogs (such as German Shepherds) will also track or trail, using whatever it takes to get the job done, while your tracking or trailing dogs (such as Bloodhounds) may be able to air scent but usually do not.

The air scent or area dog is one that is generally used to find any human scent in a specified area, although some of these dogs are capable of being scent specific. They are usually worked off lead to allow the dog to freely range back and forth. This tactic enables them to clear large specific search areas by using the wind to locate any human scent in that area. This resource is great when you do not have a scent article or source to work with and you generally need to clear a specific search sector.

The second type of canine resource is the tracking dog, which is usually worked on lead. Being scent specific, they use the victim’s scent to follow the path of the victim step-by-step. It can create extra work and cost time in a search situation if the victim circles back over their tracks because the tracking dog will follow step by step, not necessarily the freshest trail. The ability to determine the exact path a person may have taken is why the tracking dog is more favored by law enforcement for article or evidence recovery.

The trailing dog is very similar to the tracking dog, usually worked on lead and is scent specific. The trailing dog is scented just as a tracking dog using a wide variety of objects. The biggest difference is that they will use the newest, “hottest” scent, thereby shortening the trail to the victim by eliminating the “wandering trails” the victim may have created. This will often eliminate the need to cover long sections of the trail and provide a “find” in a shorter frame of time.

The common denominator for all these dogs is that they use scent as a target to seek. A scent article is usually a clue or object that your victim has physically touched. A scent-specific canine can be scented on a variety of objects - clothing, a foot print, even cigarette butts or a half-eaten chicken leg! In broader terms, It can be the scent of a living person, or also the scent of human remains. It can be the scent of a fire accelerant or a specific drug narcotic.

Without getting into a long technical discussion regarding scent theory, I heard it once described by a canine instructor as, “you and I smell the spaghetti sauce, and the canine smells each individual ingredient”. This reason is why a well-trained search dog can “inventory” a group of

people who may have contaminated a scent source or scene and find the person who is missing from the scent source.

We as handlers and search managers often limit the dog by limiting what we think the dog can do. Failure of a canine resource can usually be linked back to the handler limiting the dog through their lack of knowledge and experience, also by simply not trusting the dog. During training the handlers should use that time to expand their understanding by being creative in learning the abilities of their dog. How old of a trail can the dog work? What scent object, contaminated or not, can the dog work? Yes, many people believe an article of clothing that has been handled by a person other than the canine handler during the scent article collection, is contaminated and useless. Not so. If the person who handled the scent article is available to be “inventoried” by the canine, the dog will understand that they are to find the scent missing other than the person who contaminated the scent article.

I learned a long time ago not to limit the dog based on my own preconceptions. We had worked a ¼ mile trail in a local park area, within an urban environment, about 3 weeks earlier and we had left small one inch pieces of flagging tape in the trees above the dog’s visual focus to allow us to correct the dog should she get off-trail (she was a young bloodhound). My wife wanted to see if her dog, Molly Maguire, could work a trail of that age. I was dropped off at the end of the old trail and laid a new trail that extended the old trail by several hundred yards.. The dog was started at the beginning of the old trail. It took some time as the trail had deteriorated causing gaps in the scent but Molly was successful in working out the problem. The fun part was watching her find the new, fresh, “hot” scent and take off like a rocket to find me at the end of the trail.

Using the correct resource in the specific environment is critical. As a search manager you may have never seen these dogs work or even know their handler. We have to rely on the handlers to be objective and honest, or we have to consider what certifications the canine AND handler have met. I know this just struck a nerve with many handlers but various certifications can help to identify capabilities, such as how old of a trail has this dog worked, has it worked day or night problems, length of the trail, size of the area searched, etc. All of these items are needed to position the resource to be the most effective and properly assess the final probability of detection (POD) of that field resource.

Canines have been doing this for thousands of years to survive; the human handler is often the weak link. Our 10 month old bloodhound Olivia was given a problem that I personally thought she would fail during a training exercise. The search area was heavily contaminated with multiple trails – it was a highly utilized nature preserve area and had many people walking through the area. We placed a training victim in a moving vehicle and drove through an area that had not been previously walked by our victim. Olivia was scented on the victim’s hat, which was thrown about 50 ft. from the road. Olivia was scented on the hat and when she crossed the road she took a hard left to find the vehicle parked around a bend about ¼ mile down the road with our victim lying down in the back seat. Olivia had picked up the scent of our victim from the air leakage out of the car.

Working with canines is not an exact science. The more you know about the resources, how they work and what they have done can help to lead to a more successful conclusion on a very time sensitive-situation. Search is an emergency. The life of some child or other loved one is in our hands. They deserve nothing less that our very best effort.

*Don Stephens is the founder and executive director for First Response Search and Rescue Team, Inc. based in east Texas and is a current NASAR Board member. With over 25 years of SAR experience, today he primarily works as an instructor and search manager when he is not training with his wife Kim and their trailing bloodhounds. For more information please visit their website at [www.frsar.org](http://www.frsar.org) or contact him at: [donstephens@frsar.org](mailto:donstephens@frsar.org).*



Yes Molly, people can hide  
In the trees.



First Response handler / trainer  
Kim Stephens and "Molly" working an  
urban search training problem.



Don Stephens and Ms. Molly



Olivia sleeping after training



First Response handler / trainer Craig Jones and  
"Gunny" working a wandering elderly search.