

Communication

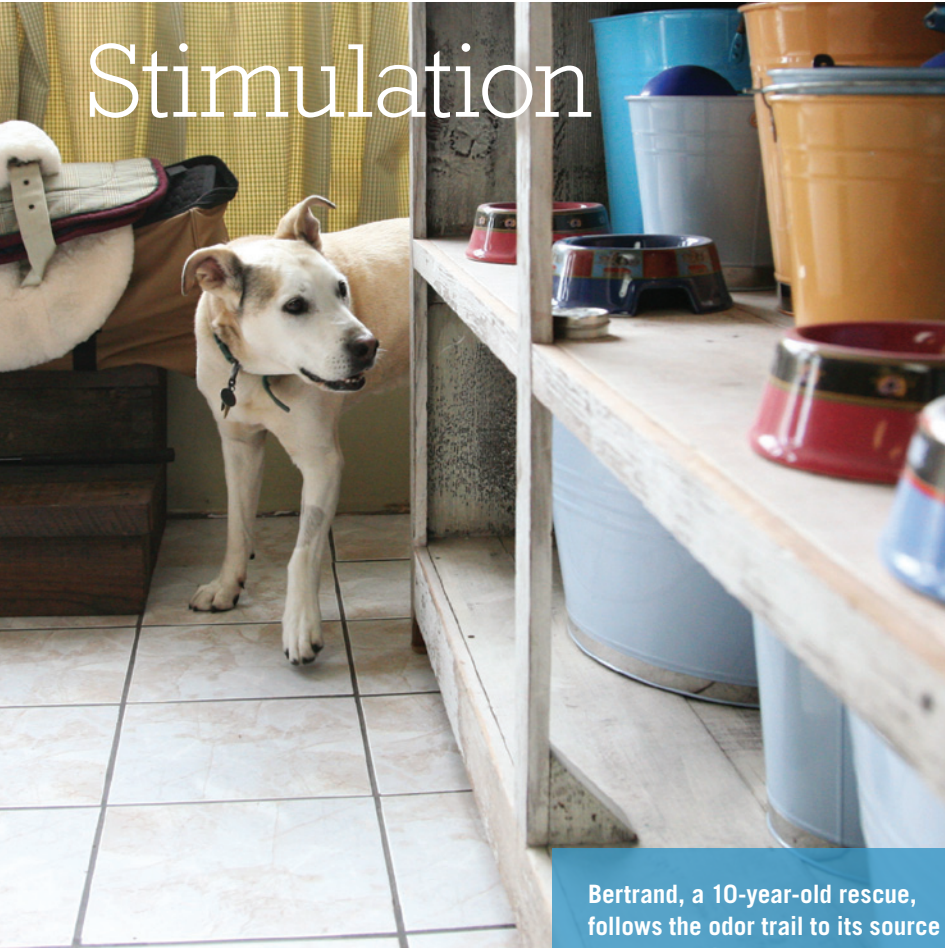


Engaging

Nose Work

The latest training activity develops your dog's natural scenting abilities through fun and games BY SANDRA MANNION | PHOTOGRAPHY BY DANIELA LOPEZ

Stimulation



Focus

Bertrand, a 10-year-old rescue, follows the odor trail to its source and alerts his handler to the exact location. Besides being fun and great exercise, dogs who practice nose work improve their focus and gain confidence as well as build rapport with their handlers.



Confidence

ECHO, A SLIGHT, 33-POUND sighthound mix, boldly bounds through the training-room door. Her tail swishes high and wild as her sensitive nose quivers in anticipation of the scent-searching game about to ensue. Her owner, Amy Cook, releases her into the room full of people with the cue “Find it!” and she surges ahead to explore a random row of



cardboard boxes strewn about the floor. Even for a dog-savvy observer, it would be difficult to guess from her puppy-like enthusiasm that Echo is a mature nine-year-old rescue who tends to be shy with strangers. She briefly passes her nose over each box, and as she slows to one in particular, she pokes her head in expectantly. Her “find” is confirmed with a flood of treats and a joyful celebration with her handler. They are both clearly thrilled with her work. “I’m really enjoying finally doing something with Echo that she thoroughly loves,” says Cook, “and I have a renewed appreciation of her inherent talents. After all, she’s doing something no human can do!”

Echo’s work in this case is K9 Nose Work, a recreational sport rapidly exploding in popularity among pet owners. The objective is for the dog to



“Nose Work engages Bertrand like nothing else. His whole demeanor changes when he works. He’s got the body language of a confident little professional when he searches.” —COLLEEN BOYLE, OWNER

both physical exercise and mental stimulation can be met even within a small space. “One of the greatest advantages,” adds Herot, “is that the sport suits every kind of dog and the activity requires no previous skill on the part of the handler. Anyone can do it.” Inexhaustible puppies, high-drive sport dogs, seniors, socially or physically challenged dogs and happy well-adjusted pets are all given equal access to the positive outlet that scent work provides.

In classic learning environments, like group obedience class, dogs may be either nervous or overstimulated and can have difficulty absorbing new information. Often owners are preoccupied with steering clear of the neighboring dog, and may be frustrated by their pet’s wary or overzealous nature. But in the Nose Work classroom, searches are run one by one, allowing dogs with any number of normally challenging behavioral issues to focus

and learn. Working individually and without social stimulation allows the dog to channel energy, leaving dog and handler free to concentrate and learn from each other. Natural dog behaviors commonly regarded as “uncivilized” are encouraged as part of drive-building in the game of scenting and searching. Pulling through the door excitedly, turning full attention on the environment and leaping about playfully are not considered problem behaviors here. Embarrassed eye rolling and disapproving glances are replaced with laughter and admiration as the dogs are allowed to express themselves and focus on their job.

Bay Area Certified Nose Work Instructor Kelly Dunbar of SIRIUS Dog Training has seen huge transformations in a growing number of Nose Work students. “I’ve watched environmentally sensitive dogs learn to overcome their fears through Nose Work,” she says. “It

seems to help them build confidence, and both handler and dog no longer focus so intently on the environment; instead they channel that energy into the search. Reactivity virtually disappears.” This certainly seems the case with Bertrand, a 10-year-old Lab/Pit rescue. His owner, Colleen Boyle, says, “Nose Work engages Bertrand like nothing else. His whole demeanor changes when he works. He’s got the body language of a confident little professional when he searches.” Formerly timid and aroused around new people and dogs, Bertrand’s self-assurance and ability to focus have grown exponentially. Boyle believes this has developed out of the sense of accomplishment that comes from mastering a difficult task. “For me, it’s just gratifying to see him enjoy something and strut around looking proud of himself when we’re training.”

The training process encourages the



1. Havoc, a 3-year-old Belgian Malinois, searches boxes for the target odor. 2. He alerts to the odor source. 3. Havoc is rewarded at the source of the odor. 4. Mosh, a 5-year-old Boston Terrier, performs a box drill, one of the elements of competition. 5. Mosh and Erica celebrate his “find” with a vigorous game of tug!

locate a hidden target scent and alert us to its exact whereabouts in the environment. The tables are turned in this activity as the dog teaches the owner to trust the dog’s superior scenting capabilities. Constructive physical exercise and intense mental stimulation are among the many benefits to the dog; owners advance to students of behavior by learning to read frequently overlooked subtleties of canine body language. As the dog perfects the game of

searching and scenting for a reward, handlers are indoctrinated into the invisible world of scent with their companions as their guides.

Born out of a desire to share what working dogs have revealed in for years, K9 Nose Work as a sport was developed in southern California in 2006 by a team of highly experienced individuals: Amy Herot, Jill Marie O’Brien and Ron Gaunt—all professional trainers and handlers with working certified

detection dogs. Herot writes, “Our detection dogs always look so satisfied and are relaxed after a search. It seemed like companion dogs should have the opportunity to enjoy the same benefits.” The team adapted essential elements of detection dog training into a motivational and portable sport specifically designed for companion dogs, requiring little space and minimal equipment to practice. When a dog is working his body and mind, the satisfying effects of



Dune, a 6-year-old American Bulldog, performs a vehicle search.

dog to refine his innate hunting and scenting skills. Handlers are taught to quietly support their dogs as the dogs develop individual searching styles through a progressive series of classes. First, the dog is encouraged to explore multiple open boxes for the scent of a hidden reward—usually a savory treat or a coveted toy for chasing or tugging. Search difficulty is gradually increased by changing environmental variables: closing the boxes, raising the height of the hide, introducing varied objects to the search environment and eventually moving the search outside of the box. While the dog catches on to the game and builds drive for searching, the target odor is paired with the reinforcing treat. Over time and at the individual team's pace, the handler gains skill in reading behavioral indicators as the dog learns to track the odor trail to its source. Dogs eventually associate the target odor with the reward, which is ultimately removed from the environment and delivered by the handler upon indication of the target odor alone. The thrill of exploration and pursuit seems to magnify the intensity of the game and compound the reward value.

The sport's swift growth beyond its southern California center is a clear indicator of its wide appeal to companion dog owners. Since its inception, classes given by certified instructors have spread quickly up the West Coast and even reached the far corners of the Northeast. Massachusetts-based trainer Scott Williams, of Beyond the Leash Dog Training, has introduced the concept to over 200 dogs in a short eight months. He believes the popularity lies, in part, in the lack of equipment involved. "It doesn't require a large fenced field," he says. "It can be done indoors or out, anytime of the year, and requires relatively little handler involvement. Actually, the less the owner does, the better the dogs like it!"

For handlers wishing to train to a specific standard and test their Nose Work skills, titles can be earned through trials organized and sanctioned by the National Association of Canine Scent Work (NACSW). The only prerequisite for trialing is passing the Odor Recognition Test (ORT), in which the dog identifies the appropriate target odor for his level of competition: sweet birch for NW1, aniseed for NW2, clove bud for NW3. Elements of competition include

RESOURCES

For more information on competition requirements, tools for training and availability of classes with certified instructors in your area, visit:

K9 Nose Work Workshops
funnosework.com

National Association of Canine
Scent Work
nacswork.net

box drills, interior building, exterior area and vehicle searches. Practicing for competition is easy and can be done just about anywhere. Maine student Mac McCluskey says, "What I like about Nose Work is that if you are competitive, you have the opportunity to get good at it. It's easy to hide a scent anywhere, and the more creative, the better a dog likes it. And if you and your dog are weekend athletes, it's just as much fun!"

We humans are ultimately responsible for orchestrating the best decisions for our adored animal companions, but within the realm of scent and K9 Nose Work, we learn to trust our dogs to be our best guides and teachers. Here, the dog is always right, always good, and we are allowed an opportunity to achieve a better understanding of him. Sport founder Herot says, "The nose is such a primary source of information for the dog, and this type of work is a very powerful way to connect with your dog in their world." Evidenced by the smiling faces and clearly content dogs leaving the Nose Work classroom, the sport succeeds as a method for deepening relationships with our canine companions as we learn how they experience the world. **B**

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