



Choosing a Puppy for Search and Rescue Work

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When we look for a good candidate for a SAR Dog, we are looking for a pup with many qualities. These many qualities must fit together to provide the very best dog for the work.

A “sound” dog

A prospective handler will want to look for a pup with ‘sound’ conformation, which is a bit different from the conformation a top notch ‘show dog’ might exhibit. In other words, you need a balanced dog able to cover ground with endurance and agility. Good, balanced angulation front and rear is most important; in addition, shoulder placement and strong rear assembly are important for jumping and climbing. Find a pup with “sound” conformation; consult the experts in the breed of your choice.

Male or female?

That’s a personal choice for you to make.

What breed or mixed breed?

Generally, the Working and Herding breeds are the best prospects for SAR dogs particularly German Shepherds, Labrador Retrievers, Golden Retrievers and Border Collies who are a very popular choices among SAR Dog handlers. Purebred or mixed heritage really doesn’t matter, so long as the dog can do the work for which it is being trained. A rule of thumb - look for a dog that that will be approximately 50 to 75 lbs. (23 – 34 K) as an adult.

Training principles

SAR dogs are highly trained search resources and must possess trainability, high energy, intelligence, confidence, very high drives to play and hunt. Search and Rescue is more than just an activity for you and your pet. This training is serious; peoples’ lives and well-being are involved. The training requires different approaches and attitudes. We use positive training methods but at some point in the process, some level of compulsion is usually needed.

Only a small percentage of dogs end up meeting initial assessment requirements; and only some of the K9 applicants who pass the initial assessments reach ultimate certification.



The principles of SAR Dog training are really quite simple – we teach the dog to search out the desired scent (a person for example) and to do everything in its power to get to the source of that scent (the person) so that they can get their toy and play! There’s no mystery, no innate desire on the part of the dog to save humanity – all they want is their toy! The dog’s drive to get that toy is most important. The ‘alert’ is a “trained behavior”.

You would be well advised to look for a breeder who will give the pup a good foundation in that critical stage prior to eight weeks. The breeder can do a lot to socialize the pup to noise and adventures and they can begin play and reward rituals and they can set the ground work for ‘come when called’ training and other desirable behaviours. Once you take the pup home, it’s up to you to continue all of this, and it is hard work; not a moment can be wasted in the pup’s education.

Temperament and Aptitude are the key

Temperament and aptitude are most important in a potential SAR dog. You want a friendly, stable dog who is outgoing and one who does not exhibit sound- or touch-sensitivity. In fact, the dog must like bodily contact. **One of the most important characteristics of a good SAR pup is the desire to play with toys and people, and to retrieve objects of any type. The drive to hunt for a toy is extremely important.** Also, the dog must be able to focus on the task at hand and not be distracted. Do not confuse hyperactivity with an energetic disposition. In our experience, hyperactivity goes hand in hand with lack of focus; an energetic puppy seeks a focus for the drive he/she exhibits. That focus can be on your search work.

Temperament tests for potential SAR dogs

Many dog trainers and behaviorists swear by puppy temperament tests which are generally done when the pup is 49 days of age. Several variations of these tests exist and many experienced dog people add favorite tests of their own. SARDAA has developed a temperament and aptitude test that suits our needs.

Other suggestions

Part of the process in finding a pup is to study the pup’s pedigree. Yes, “working titles” are most important. The IPO titles are the most desirable because many of the same ‘drives’ needed for IPO work are also used for SAR. Tracking titles are an added bonus and demonstrate the ancestor’s ability to follow scent. Obedience/Rally titles are good because they show trainability but don’t really tell you anything about drives; likewise, agility and other sport dog titles. If your



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breed club(s) offer temperament testing in conjunction with conformation titles, these can be very valuable in terms of extra information about parents, grandparents and other relatives.

A great source of information is people in canine Search and Rescue with the breed you are interested in; talk to them for references and detailed opinions on qualities of pups best suited to SAR work in the long term.