Selecting a Dog for Search and Rescue

Selection of the SAR candidate dog is critical for both dog and handler success. While no selection method will be 100% accurate at selecting dogs that will be successful in SAR, the chances of wash-outs are greatly reduced by appropriate screening. Screening should be carried out at puppy selection (generally at 8 weeks) and then again at 1 yr of age. The primary concerns during candidate screening are the presence of appropriate drives (particularly prey and food drives), tractability, temperament, and tenacity ("work ethic"). Extreme defensiveness "civility") is a disqualifying characteristic, although well-trained dogs of steady temperament with natural defensive drive, a common trait in working breeds such as the GSD and Malinois, may make excellent working dogs.

Testing Prey Drive

Search and rescue training relies heavily on two drives: prey drive (the tendency to chase a moving object), and hunt drive (the tendency to search or "hunt" for an object when it stops moving and disappears from sight). Prey drive is easily tested for by tying a toy or small towel onto the end of a string and dragging it across the ground in quick jerky movements.

Testing Distractibility

Testing for "distractibility" is an excellent way of predicting good work ethic in a puppy or older dog. Dogs that are easily distracted lack the ability to focus on a task for long periods of time. Although focus can be improved through training, some dogs are inherently more distractible and will struggle with this throughout their careers. Even in 7 and 8 week old puppies differences in their ability to focus can be seen and tested for.

Perform this test when the pup/dog is hungry. Using a smelly treat such as a piece of chicken or hotdog, show the treat to the pup and let him/her taste/lick it but do not let him have it. Hold it in your closed fist and let the pup smell it, lick your hand, and in general try to get it from you. This should be done while other people are moving about, littermates are playing nearby, etc. Note how long the pup will remain focused, trying to obtain the treat, even with distractions going on all around.

For the second part of the test let the pup watch you toss the treat into some grass or leaves some distance away. Make sure the pup sees the treat as it is tossed. Release him and note how long he continues to search for the food. If he finds it easily, repeat the test making it more difficult (longer distance, taller grass). This is also testing for "hunt drive" but the addition of distractions gives a good measure of the distractibility of the pup.

Ideally we want to choose the dog or puppy that will chase a moving object, grab it, pick it up (often shaking or "killing" it), and then return with the object to the tester without becoming distracted. On the food test we want the dog to remain focused on the food ignoring the distractions, and to continue to attempt to obtain the food without giving up. When the treat is thrown the dog should hunt continuously until he finds it, and then return to the tester looking for more.

It is also important that a search dog be able to withstand physical discomfort. In addition to mental and physical exertion, the dog will likely need to navigate thick brush, snow and ice, and other obstacles that may cause physical discomfort. A reasonable degree of pain tolerance is thus desirable in the search dog. In puppies, some idea of this may be ascertained by pinching the webbing between the toes of the puppy. A puppy with little tolerance for this discomfort may turn into a dog that balks at going through brush or that is incapacitated by minor scratches.

While it is rare to find a dog or puppy that fits this "ideal" portrait, the closer he comes to it the greater his potential as an extraordinary search dog will be.

At the same time we are watching how the dog/pup interacts with other dogs, puppies and people. He should show great desire to be with any and all people, and should not be overly bossy or dominant with littermates or other dogs. While the dog that hides under the coffee table or sits in the back of the pen, fearful to come out, may tug at our heartstrings, this is not the one we want to choose to train for search work. Neither do we want the puppy that is constantly bowling over, snarling at and pushing around his littermates, or the one who growls when a person approaches him, his food bowl or toy.

He should be friendly, outgoing and curious, and should not become overly worried when placed in a new environment or when exposed to new people, dogs, noises, sensations, etc. If startled he should recover quickly, endeavoring to investigate whatever it was that startled him. He should not show fear or aggression with new dogs or people.

Testing for Sound Sensitivity/Surprise

A puppy can be tested for excessive "softness" of temperament in relation to surprise noises by creating a loud noise and watching the puppy's reaction. For example, while one person is playing with the puppy, have another throw a metal dog bowl onto the floor. A puppy with good temperament in this regard will startle but not spook, immediately recovering and expressing curiosity for the source of the noise. Some puppies may not startle at all. Puppies that "spook", becoming fearful or running away, may not be appropriate SAR candidates. Keep in mind that it is important to accustom any dog to various noise environments. Even a dog that tests well as described should still be gradually exposed to as many noises as possible, including e.g. televisions, radios, music, vehicles, loud animal noises, gun shots, etc.

A few caveats: puppies that have been kept too long with littermates often become dependent upon them and will have a difficult time separating. Puppies should not remain with littermates past 8-12 wks of age without also receiving a lot of individual time alone and with people and other dogs. Obtaining two puppies from the same litter is not recommended; better to get two pups separated in age by a few months, who do not know each other. Also, older pups or dogs that have not been socialized and taken places may not be able to adjust well to a job that requires them to be constantly exposed to new experiences and environments.

While puppies and dogs that do not test out well, or who show some of the problems indicated above may beat the odds and become good search dogs, they will almost certainly require a great deal of extra time and energy to fix these things- time and energy that would better spent on training them to do their job. In all likelihood they will still never be as good at their job as dogs without these issues. When someone's life is on the line it is essential that we provide the most highly trained, focused and motivated search dogs possible.

A number of comprehensive working puppy evaluation systems are currently in use in the working dog community and may be appropriate for selecting SAR dogs. Examples include Jack and Wendy Volhard's Puppy Aptitude Test (PAT) and the PAWS Working Dog Evaluation. PAWS Working Dog Evaluation (PAWS stands for Possessiveness, Attention, Willingness, and Strength) as well as one modified from the Federal Emergency Management Agency canine testing (FEMA US&R/Disaster Dog) at the Paws of Life Foundation Temperament Test

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