



Dog Sports:

Taking a Look at K9 Nose Work®

By Debra Kelley

What if there was a sport...

that almost any dog -- from dog-reactive toy Poodles to fearful English Mastiffs, from arthritic Labs to ancient Shelties -- could not only train for and compete in, but excel at? A sport in which obedience commands and signals are not only unnecessary, but actually forbidden? A sport in which, for a change, "the dogs get to tell *you* how to play and where to go, and you need to be willing to follow," says HKC member Melinda Grosch?

Such a sport does indeed exist, and it's called K9 Nose Work®. Created around 2007-2008 by three trainers with backgrounds in narcotics and explosives detection training, K9 Nose Work® applies elements of that detection training to develop dogs' natural scenting abilities by using their desire to hunt and their love of food treats or toys.

"Nose work is a sport made for Lydia," says Melinda of her very active black Labrador. "I got started when my roommate started taking lessons with her Tervurens and told me I had to do something with Lydia because Lydia was driving her nuts." With only one dog and handler at a time in the training area, while other dogs wait crated or in their handlers' vehicles, even dogs that are reactive to other dogs and/or people can train in nose work. And behaviors that might be annoying in other contexts can be advantages in nose work. "Lydia has spent her entire life looking for stuff to steal -- especially stuff high up, which is a very good nose work trait since some of the 'hides' are above the dog's

head and many dogs have trouble looking for stuff above them."

"The cool part of nose work is that truly almost any dog can do it," says Cindy Smith, a Certified Nose Work Instructor (CNWI), lead trainer and owner of The Right Steps dog training business in Fair Oaks. Cindy discovered the sport in early 2010, when she was looking for something non-stressful and mentally stimulating for her young, active dog with immune mediated poly-arthritis, a periodic inflammation of multiple joints that's exacerbated by stress and makes his hocks very painful when he's out of remission. That same dog also can be dog-dog and dog-people reactive. "Seeing how much it helped him made me realize how much it could help handlers out there with dogs or puppies with special issues or needs -- whether health issues, dog or people reactivity issues, and/or dogs lacking confidence and who are environmentally sensitive." Cindy's K9 Nose Work classes allow for the participation of dog-reactive and people-reactive dogs, but not truly aggressive dogs (dogs intent on doing harm and/or dogs that have a bite history - dogs that pose a liability issue). Each K9 Nose Work instructor will have his or her own individual policies about dogs participating in their classes, so be sure to check with the trainer before signing up your dog for a class.

On the Scent of K9 Nose Work®

In beginning classes, dogs learn how to scent out their favorite food treats or toys -- whatever best motivates them or is their highest-value reward. As classes and weeks progress, handlers begin to learn how to read dogs' body language to tell when a dog is 'on odor' versus just being a dog, and also learn how odor works in different environments and environmental conditions (examples: air conditioning, heat, or nothing -- no

movement of air). More advanced classes begin to involve field trips – taking the classes on the road to search new locations and in new environments. “Nose work takes lots of practice, not just taking a single class—like agility training, classes are weekly and can go on indefinitely,” Cindy notes.

As Nose Work classes progress, students return to the training facility to begin to pair the first odor (Birch) with food or toys in boxes and containers and learn the beginnings of how to handle odor, including dos and don'ts of odor handling, basics of how to observe how dogs work with an odor, and how to reward at the odor source promptly, to name a few nose work skills. “Foundation searches are started in boxes,” Cindy explains. “Keeping the sport fun for your dog and taking the time to build a solid foundation and problem-solving skills from the start, whether you're pursuing the sport just for fun or have a goal to one day compete, are the most important steps to a strong future in K9 Nose Work®.”

Handlers and their dogs progress from training with container searches to interior building searches, exterior building searches and vehicle searches. In fact those who go on to trial in the sport will do each of those four types of searches at each level, increasing the number of scents (Birch, Anise, and Clove) sought for and the number of possible ‘hides’ with each successive level, among other variables.

Competitive opportunities to trial and title are offered strictly under the oversight of K9 Nose Work's govern-



‘Nick’ is on scent, honing in on the odor emanating from the small white tube hidden on the exterior door.

(Photo by Cindy C. Smith/The Right Steps)

ing organization, the National Association of Canine Scent Work, LLC® (NACSW™). All dogs entering trials must first have passed an Odor Recognition Test (ORT) on the specific odor(s) that will be used in the trial – Birch at the first level, adding Anise at the second level and adding Clove at the third level. HKC member Karin Wickstrom’s Labrador Retriever ‘Flash’ passed her ORT on birch last year, as did Melinda’s Labs ‘Lydia’ and ‘Justin.’

The Nose Knows No “Nos”

Just as almost all dogs can train in and enjoy nose work, so can just about all handlers. “Handlers need to learn how to let go and trust their dogs,” Cindy says. “The sport is obedience-free: no ‘nos,’ no sits or downs or stays, no clickers, no thinking for your dog. After all, he has the nose, and it’s his job to think – not the human’s!”

In fact, the percentage of a dog's brain that’s devoted to analyzing smells is 40 times larger than that of a

human. It's been estimated that dogs can identify smells somewhere between 1,000 to 10,000 times better than humans can.* "There aren't any corrections in nose work – obedience commands or signals can ruin the dog's natural instincts – and you need to give as many rewards as the dog gives correct signals," observes Karin, whose Lab 'Nick' quickly and cleverly learned to put his paw on the box containing the target scent multiple times in order to get multiple food treats. Cindy reminds students that the handler must pay the dog each and every time the dog goes back to the odor source.



Having located the odor box attached to the wheel well of this vehicle, 'Nick' alerts Karin and is ready to get paid for his find—treats!

(Photo by Cindy C. Smith/The Right Steps)

While the dog takes the initiative in nose work skills developed during nose work can improve the performance of the dog and handler in other dog sports and training, and in daily living. "Nose work skills can help dogs be better focused and be less environmentally sensitive," says Cindy. "I know for my youngest dog and me it helped our focus and teamwork in agility!"

"I think the confidence dogs build from being 'right' in nose work is helpful in all aspects of training," says Melinda. "I also think scent work of any type transfers from one venue to the next, so from nose work to utility scent articles to field tracking to variable surface tracking you're using the dog's strongest sense." Karin mentions a very practical use of nose work to modify behavior: having the handler hide scents along a street or walking trail to give a dog-reactive dog a purpose and a goal, other than looking for dogs to menace. — Debra Kelley

*Stanley Coren, Ph.D. and Sarah Hodgson, Dummies.com

To find a certified K9 Nose Work instructor in your area or for specifics about what's involved in the various competitive levels of K9 Nose Work start here: <http://www.nacsw.net>

For more information on Cindy Smith and The Right Steps classes, including K9 Nose Work, visit www.therightsteps.com.



Did You Know...

The terms nose work, fun nose work, scent work, search work are all commonly used references to describe any activity where the dog is using its nose to locate a target scent or odor.

The Schnoz Knows: Understanding Odor

“In nose work classes my students have three main jobs: *becoming students of dogs* – how they look when being a dog, when on odor, or when thinking about peeing, for example; *becoming students of odor* (learning how odor works in different environments and weather conditions); and *learning to trust their dogs*,” says Cindy Smith, a Certified Nose Work Instructor (CNWI), lead trainer and owner of The Right Steps dog training business in Fair Oaks. “The handlers learn how odor works by watching the other dogs working, while theirs are resting between runs. The Right Steps K9 Nose Work Training environment is oriented for everyone in class to support each other and their dogs – everyone’s goal is for the class as a whole to be successful, safe, and have fun!”

“Understanding how odor moves is very significant,” Karin agrees. “For example, odor moves rapidly

on a metal surface, but also loses strength rapidly as it moves away from the application point. And taking into account the direction of the wind relative to the scent location is obviously critical in outdoor searches; in competition it could mean the difference in finding the scent within the allotted time, or not at all.”

“It’s important to at least know the basics such as direction of air movement, how scent behaves near walls or when on a vehicle,” says Melinda. “Also important to know is what the air temperature is doing to the odor, as hot air tends to disperse odor making a bigger area where the dog will indicate that it is ‘in odor’ but possibly making it harder to pinpoint the precise location. And it’s key to know how good dogs are at detecting extremely minute amounts of odor or scent – for example, did you just handle the ‘unscented’ end of that birch-scented Q-tip with your fingers instead of the tweezers? Oops, now you’re contaminating everything you touch. Dogs can sort through

contamination but if you want to teach the dog accuracy at first you need to be very careful about that.

“Ultimately understanding odor is important and helps you become a better handler and teammate with your dog,” Cindy says, “but please don’t let that scare you away from the sport, as it is learned over time, many sets of classes, and lots of practice! First and foremost have fun and enjoy the journey with your dog!”



Why to Consider K9 Nose Work

Nancy Schwartz: “My two dogs have totally different personalities and approach the sport differently, but both love it completely. It’s a nice break from the usual training – obedience, rally, agility, etc. – and it’s wonderful to see the dogs use their innate skills.”

Melinda Grosch: “This is a sport that your dog will find incredibly easy (at least at first) but which will challenge you to learn about your dog(s), what motivates them, and how hard they’re willing to work for that motivator. Every dog already knows how to find a scent or odor, the challenge is in getting them to do it for us when we want them to, and for only one or two specific odors.”

Karin Wickstrom: “A handler I train with got a Golden Retriever specifically to do agility, but it turned out to be so dog reactive that she couldn’t even train in that sport, much less compete. But with only one team in the nose work area at a time, and other dogs crated or in cars – and something to focus on besides those other dogs – the handler and dog are succeeding in nose work.”

(Continued from page 4)

Kathy Prevost: “I was looking for a sport to build a better bond, teamwork, and a relationship with our younger Australian Shepherd, Kyrie. K-9 Nose Work has been perfect for this! He took to the sport immediately and his success at seeking out the odor has really improved his ability to focus on a task and built his confidence. Kyrie who has a strong personality and a tendency to be dog reactive has benefited tremendously by participating in this sport and we have both had fun!”

Cindy Smith: “I’ve seen puppies or dogs that come in so shy and fearful they can barely function, some shaking or trembling, who can’t leave their owner’s side, and can’t even eat a treat; some are even people reactive...then within about three weeks and with their handlers doing their homework, totally different dogs are coming to class – ones that will leave their owners’ sides to work independently, eat treats, search closer to the audience, and search with more confidence! It’s quite incredible to watch the changes over the weeks and in future classes. For the dogs each and every search is fun and a new adventure – they never get bored!”

Sincere thanks to Debra Kelley, Kathryn Miele, and Hangtown Kennel Club for this terrific K9 Nose Work Article, for including me in it’s creation, and for allowing The Right Steps to include it on our Website! Sincerely, Cindy C. Smith / The Right Steps — Fair Oaks, CA

