

Leading the Hunt

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Any handler who has used a working dog to search for people and items knows that dogs naturally read human body language. Dogs know where a person is looking and what direction they are moving. Even untrained dogs that are socialized with people will turn their attention in the direction their owner or handler is looking if the person looks at something for more than a second or so. If you want proof of this, try this with the next stray cat or other small animal you see before your dog does, and see if your dog pays attention to the animal.

When working a dog in any sort of off lead search, but particularly when searching large areas outside, part of the training challenge is getting the dog to search where the handler wants it to search. Most of my experience in this area comes from searching for evidence, human remains and missing persons in rough terrain and thick vegetation. Working on lead in thick areas is not practical, so the dog must work off lead at the handler's direction. The difference between looking for small pieces of evidence and lost subjects is only a matter of scale – the search strategy is the same, but the spacing of the dog's paths through the search area varies with the amount of scent being given off by the target item.

When searching a crime scene for evidence, the handler may or may not have an idea of what or how many items they are searching for. Like a narcotics search, the only way to know that all the evidence is recovered is to systematically search the entire scene. I've covered some searching strategies for evidence in previous articles (see articles on the Maine Search and Rescue Dogs web site, www.mesard.org).

Systematically Searching Areas

A systematic searching method that gives the dog the best advantage is to work grid lines across the area perpendicular to the wind but advancing each line into the wind. To picture this, imagine a football field and you are standing on the goal line at the DOWNWIND end of the field. The wind is blowing directly down the field towards you. To search the field systematically for evidence using grid lines, you would start at one corner on the goal line, walk across the field following the goal line, turn at a right

angle into the wind, move 5 yards upwind on the side line, turn at a right angle and go across following the 5 yard line to the next side line, turn upwind, move up 5 yards to the 10 yard line, go across following the 10 yard line, etc., until you have advanced all the way to the other goal line. In this case, if you move up 5 yards each time, your grid lines are spaced 5 yards apart.

To cut the dog's ranging down if you have a dog that wants to run ahead, it can be better to search advancing WITH the wind. If, for example, you had to search an area bordered by a busy road and the wind was blowing FROM the road, it would be much safer to search the road side first and then advance with the wind away from the road. Otherwise the dog may run ahead towards the road towards something it smells or a distraction that catches its attention. One way to counter distractions is to search away from them so that the handler is between the distraction and the searching dog. If the distraction is upwind and you search towards it, the dog won't be able to resist it.

In a real article search, the search area is rarely as defined or manicured as a football field. Before searching, the handler should look the area over and design a strategy. The handler needs also needs to make decisions on how far to space the search grid lines. If the team is searching for something as large and smelly as a wallet, every 5 yards would work. If the wallet was lost recently and weather conditions were good, a well trained evidence dog should be able to smell the wallet 10 to 20 yards away. If the search is for a penny, the team would have to search the field every 1 or 2 yards depending on conditions. What a dog's "hit" or smell range is with different targets is something handlers learn with practice.

When an air scent search and rescue team is looking for a missing person, the handler will have the dog search the area in a grid pattern, just like the football field search I described. The difference will be that the hit or smell range for the person or body is much longer than that of an article. A wilderness SAR dog will easily smell a live person 100 yards away and can sometimes smell them a quarter mile or more away, depending on conditions.

Leading the Search with Body Language

Because dogs naturally orient the way their handlers are facing, look where their handlers are looking, and move in the direction their handlers are moving, a handler can direct their dog to search simply by orienting and moving in a specific way.

First of all, a handler's attention and body language is crucial in countering distractions. Good handlers learn to pretend that distractions don't exist, focusing all their attention laser like on their dog and the task at hand. This keeps the dog focused.

A good handler does not look at distractions or items that the dog should not be concerned with. Even if a handler is talking to someone, he or she should still keep their gaze and attention on their dog.

Second, handlers need to use their body orientation and movement to help the dog walk the grid. The handler should start out on the base line and face the direction the team needs to walk along the base line, perpendicular to the wind. Once the handler decides on that direction, the handler should keep his or her shoulders facing that direction, even if the handler has to stop and wait for the dog. If the dog is actively searching, the handler should observe the dog searching the area and only advance forward when they think the area the dog is working is covered. The handler advances forward, watches the dog search, then moves forward when that piece is covered, always keeping his or her shoulders facing in the direction along the line the team is working on, even if the handler has to stop and look over a shoulder to watch the dog. The facing of the body tells the dog which way the hunt is proceeding. If the handler keeps moving around and facing different directions, the dog will become confused and the search pattern will break down.

It is important that the handler be predictable in their search pattern. The dog should be able to look at the handler and know from the handler's orientation where the dog should be searching. Most dogs like to search out in front of or a little upwind of the handler. If they learn this is the place to be in training and the handler keeps moving forward in a predictable pattern, they know where to work. If the handler just circles around, or worse, follows the dog before the dog indicates it has target scent, the systematic search pattern breaks down. If the dog keeps trying to stay in front of the handler and the handler keeps circling or spinning to watch the dog, the dog will give up trying to follow the handler's "lead" in searching. A soft dog may give up and stand around the handler or go to heel. A hard dog may take off to work or play on his own.

Keeping a relatively straight line and consistent direction of travel allows the dog to search out in front of the handler without having to constantly "check in." When the end of the grid line is reached, the handler has to change direction and make sure the dog knows that the direction of travel is changed so that the dog swings around for the next pass. With article searches, this pattern is crucial to systematically clearing areas. In searches for missing persons, having a consistent direction of travel is important so the dog can search and do his job while the handler navigates. When working an air scent search and rescue dog, handlers have to stop moving to check compass bearings or GPS readings. When doing this, if the handler makes sure to maintain their body orientation (shoulders pointed in the direction of travel), the dog will find it easy to know where the handler is going next.

Some search systems teach handlers to face their dogs at all time, but this generally occurs only after the handler sees the dog detect the target scent, or when searching small areas. When searching large areas, once the dog has detected the target scent, the handler should follow or orient to the dog to see the outcome of the dog's work. Even during a "body orientation" directed search, the handler should always know what the dog is doing, but the handler should watch the dog with the handler's shoulders oriented in the direction the search is going.