

Want to Be a SAR Dog Handler?

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The decision to become a SAR dog handler is a difficult one. That's a fact. Are you in the middle of such a decision? If you are, there isn't any single article able to stand alone to help you decide. The only answer is a combination of research and experience.

Hopefully you found this article during the beginning stages of your decision-making process. If so, you might fall into one of two general categories. Maybe you're a dog person who would like to take your training to the next level. Or maybe you're experienced in SAR and would like to be the one to add an important resource to your unit. Either side you come from, as a dog-lover or a SAR person, doesn't matter. In the end you must be both.

A Dog Person Who Knows Little of SAR

It can be a logical progression for a trainer of working dogs to want to train a dog for SAR. Whether you come from an obedience background, a herding background, or a police background, it can be easy to adjust to training differences. As a handler, you work hard to make your dog understand exactly what you want from him. But a handler's lack of basic understanding of SAR can make a team unusable. If you know very little of what SAR is about.

Check out the Internet and the local library. These sources will give you not only general information on what to expect, but also specific people to contact. After reading and discussing your options, if you are still interested...

Join your local sheriff's SAR unit. Go to their regularly scheduled trainings. Are you physically capable to participate? No need to be a marathon runner here, but an above average fitness level is a requirement. And since you will be working closely with the members of the unit, do you like the people who are involved?

Do you have the time to become comfortable in a wilderness setting? Local SAR units meet once or twice a month to train. These days may last anywhere from a few hours to a full weekend. Most members will train on their own in all kinds of weather. This could mean training in map and compass, survival, first aid, or radio use and communications. Handling a dog could add as much as 20 hours per week to a normal training schedule.

How would you feel if a search ended badly? Some searches turn into body recoveries. Some searches end with no one found. Could you handle this? Do you have the money to invest? All members of SAR are volunteers. That means all costs of participation from traveling expenses to equipment are absorbed by the individual not the organization. Costs vary, but on average, ASD members spend \$1500 to \$2000 per year to equip and maintain their dog teams. Check the Recommended Equipment List.

SAR Person Who Knows Little of Dog Training

On average, a person educated in survival and backcountry skills has the highest success rate in becoming a SAR dog handler. This is because less time is used educating the handler and that leaves more time dedicated to dog handling. But if that person knows little about dogs, there are some things to consider.

In the 18 months to 2 years it takes to get your dog ready for certification, there won't be much time spent away from him. Everything you do will have something to do with training.

When the dog is old enough to start serious tracking and air-scenting problems, search training (separate from obedience and agility work) should take place a minimum of two to three times per week. This is not a weekend endeavor, and should be consistent and well-planned.

As the training gets more complex, the time it takes increases accordingly. It can take up to two hours to run a simple hour old track. Experienced dogs may run tracks aged 24 hours or more. Organization involves getting a helper to lay the track, allowing the track to age, and then returning to run the track.

Are you willing to choose a dog solely for SAR, or do you want to use your family pet? SAR dogs are not selected by breed but by temperament. Most successful SAR dogs belong to the working, sporting and herding breeds probably because they are easier to train. A SAR dog needs a strong desire to work. This desire is needed due to the extreme conditions the dogs are required to perform in. The dogs must work in mountain weather conditions. They must be able to work through distractions (even explosives going off on snowy mountain slopes). They must be at ease in cramped places such as helicopters, airplanes, boats, and even if jammed close to several other dogs. They must be tuned in to cues from their handlers, and still possess the ability to work on their own.

As you can see, having an exceptional nose is not a prerequisite. All dogs have good noses. The ability to scent is easy; the rest is the hard stuff.

Intangible Rewards

The lure of being a SAR dog handler is real, and the rewards far outweigh the headaches. Being on the front line of 10-15 missions a year can be exciting. For someone who really wants to help their fellow man, the endeavor allows for numerous opportunities to do so. Probably the biggest reward is the close working relationship a handler has with his dog.

All ASD handlers share amazement at how we communicate with our canine partners. A hand signal from us, and our dogs change their direction. Momentary eye contact from our dogs and we become acutely aware of their body posture. We can tell

when our dogs are frustrated because there is no scent, or excited because a lost person is near. This communication fosters a bond between handlers and dogs that creates a strong working relationship.

But one SAR dog team does not create a successful mission. As SAR dog handlers we are expected to do a small job as part of a much larger unit. We understand the big picture and do our best to fill in any missing pieces of the puzzle. Our dogs reward us every day. But that reward is minimal compared to the feeling of working with persons in a SAR unit who fight for a common goal. Sharing the elation of finding a survivor, or the sorrow of finding one deceased, bind members of a SAR unit together like a family.

Is everyone cut out for SAR? No. Are you cut out for SAR? Only you can answer that. If you make the decision to join a SAR unit, and then decide to accept the goal of training a dog, we will be the first to pat you on the back. Good dog teams are necessary. But, on the other hand, if you are in question of your ability or unsure of your commitment, maybe it is best for you to do more research or even step aside. We don't make a habit of holding the hands of those who have not gone to the effort to get proper training.