

Nose Work and Nosework

By Sonja Nordstrom

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A well-muscled Malinois strains against his collar, nose reaching and twitching to catch any trace of odor. His whole body quivers with excitement and anticipation as he maintains his position behind the doorway's threshold. Finally, his handler commands, "Zoek!" He shoots through the door, sniffs a perimeter pattern around the edge of the room, bounces up and down to check seams of drawers and cabinets, and pokes his nose deep to the backsplash of countertops. His toenails click along the tile floor, changing pace, slowing down, three steps this way, two steps the other way, and back again. He brackets the target odor, puts his paws up on the counter, and lands on the floor again. His breathing changes to an irregular rapid-fire set of short staccato inhalations followed by one big exhalation huff. The dog's tail, which wagged in rhythm with his quick trot, stiffens and flicks up over his back. His mouth closes and tenses as his nose hones in on the source location of the target odor. He locks on the seam of a cabinet with one long deep snuuuuufffff inhale breath, another exhale huff, then silence. Snapping into a quivering sit, he awaits his reward. Behind the cabinet door, 5.2 grams of cocaine.



Brittany "Echo" Do You Hear Me Now, UD and Handler photo credit (Christian Peay)

Dating back through the ages, dogs have been valued for their scenting ability. Recent studies quantify a dog's scenting ability as capable of detecting certain odors in a concentration of parts per trillion¹. Detector dogs are currently used not only for law enforcement and military functions to find contraband, explosives, and human remains, but also to detect gas leaks, bed bugs, cancer, and even to warn of impending seizures. Until a few years ago, however, the only people who witnessed the phenomenal talents of a detector dog's nose were the law enforcement, military, and professional handlers who worked with these dogs and the scientists who studied them.

Since 2009, however, the sport of Nose Work has brought the discipline of K9 detection into pet and K9 sport homes all across the country. Nose Work is a competitive sport in which dogs search for and indicate the presence of legal odors in varying environments and circumstances. The first K9 Nose Work trial was held in California in 2009 under NACSW™ (National Association of Canine Scent Work, LLC®) founded by Ron Gaunt, Amy Herot and Jill-Marie O'Brien. In 2012, United Nosework (UN) was established out of a partnership between Karen Shivers and Andrew Ramsey to promote the sport as a titling event with the United Kennel Club. On January 2, 2014, the United Kennel Club (UKC) announced that the UKC Dog Events Department will officially license UKC Nosework events beginning January 1, 2015. NACSW and United Nosework (UN) vary somewhat in their training methodology, trial protocols, and the number of odors used; however, both organizations have a common desire for people to share in a fun and productive activity with their dogs.



“Dozer” saying, “I’m ready to find it, Mom!” (photo Credit Christian Peay)

No matter under which organization one chooses to trial, the sport of Nosework is set apart from other dog sports by the diversity of handlers and dogs who successfully compete and title. Historically, competitive dog sports, whether hunting trials, agility, flyball, dock diving events, or even the protection sports, require a physically capable, athletic, and usually high energy dog. Nosework, however, provides a great option for just about any dog, large or small, bold or shy, obedient or wild. To quote the most recent UN Rulebook, “The concept of Nosework is that all handlers, regardless of physical abilities, and all dogs, regardless of physical structure, should have the opportunity to participate and experience success in Nosework.” Even deaf dogs, blind dogs, and dogs missing all or part of one limb may participate in UN Nosework trials as long as the dog does not exhibit stiffness or soreness in one or more of its remaining limbs.

NACSW requires their instructors to graduate from a challenging and specific instructor certification program. UN, on the other hand, has enlisted the talents of people who are proven in the field with real life detector dog experience as handlers, trainers, and/or evaluators. UN recognizes that most detector dog handlers/trainers have completed hundreds if not thousands of hours of structured and professional training, worked hundreds of missions in the field, and have extensive depth of knowledge and experience regarding working with detector dogs and odor behavior.



Airdale “Xander” registered name Cooleamber’s Talisman, CD and Handler (photo credit Christian Peay)

To illustrate the diversity of people drawn to Nosework with their dogs, at a recent Introduction to Nosework two-day training class held in Utah, a place where Nosework has not yet taken hold, class participants ranged dramatically from the complete novice to accomplished obedience and agility competitors and trainers. The dogs ran the gamut from a high drive German Shepherd trained in French Ringsport to a sweet lovable dog that had been rescued as a stray from a Native American Indian Reservation. A participant who attended with her service dog was excited to find a competitive sport in which she is physically able to participate; one that also provides a mind stimulating, drive building, and fun activity for her dog. Another participant reported that when traveling down the long driveway to the facility for the second day of training, her dog broke out in joyful song in anticipation of more “searching” fun. A training-class participant reported that in her excitement about this new activity, the evening after training, she set Tupperware containers throughout her living room to let her dog free search for treats. Despite the differences in personal motivations, training experience levels, their dogs’ temperaments, and natural drives, all of these participants share a genuine and complete love for their dogs and a desire to engage them in an enjoyable activity.



The Nose Works class was held at the [Friends of Animals Utah Rescue Rehab Ranch](#) Located in Park City Utah. The Ranch also received a portion of the class proceeds.

It is this writer’s opinion that until one has observed the talents of a dog’s nose, one cannot fully appreciate the brilliance of a dog. For this reason, we dog-sport enthusiasts need to unite, bringing an awareness of the fledgling sport of K9 Nosework to continue its momentum and growth nationwide.

Sonja Nordstrom Holds Training classes in Park City Utah, [Sonja’s Dog Training](#)

Reference*: Walker, D.B. et al. 2006. "Naturalistic quantification of canine olfactory sensibility." Applied Animal Behaviour Science 97: 241-254. www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0168159105002194

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Written by **Sonja Nordstrom**



Sonja Nordstrom started working K9 Search and Rescue/Recovery and Detection in 1995. She has trained, certified and fielded four of her own dogs in the various disciplines of Live Find SAR, Water Search, and Human Remains Detection (HRD) with successful deployments to the Pentagon after 9/11, throughout the Western United States, Mexico, the Middle East, and most recently to Europe searching for WWII MIAs. Over the years, she has obtained HRD certifications under NNDDA, NAPWDA, USPCA, CA P.O.S.T., CARDA/CA OES, and Tri-State K9. Sonja obtained a Detector Dog Trainer's certification (Narcotics/Explosives) from Vohne Liche Kennels (State of Indiana) in 2003 and has provided training to Law Enforcement and SAR handlers at seminars and through classes to handlers from as far away as Puerto Rico. In addition to the K9 Search field work, Sonja and her dogs have competed in the dog sports of Schutzhund, French Ring, Mondio Ring, and Dock Diving. Sonja recently retired with 23 years of service as a Special Agent of the FBI during which time she and her dogs deployed as a resource for the FBI Evidence Response Team. Sonja now owns and operates Sonja's Dog Training, LLC, located in Summit County Utah, offering UN/UKC Nosework seminars and private in-home obedience training and behavior modification. She also continues to provide volunteer SAR services with her three field certified Dutch Shepherds and serves as a trainer with Great Basin K9 SAR and evaluator with Tri-State K9 SAR.