

## Common Handler Errors in Scent Work

As a scent work team, you have an important role supporting your dog. Handler errors can derail your training making it harder for you and your dog to maintain focus and excitement about this amazing sport.

Some of the top pitfalls to avoid are:

- Crowding your dog- moving in too close as the dog is working the problem puts pressure on the dog to give you space which may take the dog farther away from source. It can also inadvertently send the dog in the wrong direction or cause them to disengage from the search altogether.
- Giving off false cues- Be aware of your own body language when your dog is searching. Avoid unintentionally cueing or guiding your dog towards the scent source.
  - Stopping at source, changing pace, or circling an area
  - Staring or pointing at source
  - Holding your breath
  - Hand gestures or reaching for treats/toys
- Failure to read your dog's body language- failing to notice when your dog's body language changes as they search leaves them without proper support. If they are working into scent you need to be ready to reward and if they are investigating a novel odor (another dog, dropped treats, rodent, etc) you should be ready to redirect back to the search.
- Pulling the dog away from odor- this happens when we fail or incorrectly read the dog's body language and sniffing patterns rather than let the dog problem solve and move on. It is common when doing blind searches and the handler does not know the location of the source and takes the dog in a direction they feel the source might be. It can also occur if the handler is waiting for the trained final alert and the dog has not offered it but the bulk of the body language is telling the handler they are at source.
- Talking too much! Don't nag your dog with talking, pointing, staring, and interrupting their search. Let them problem solve and work the search area.
- Failure to make a mental note of the factors affecting odor movement in the room
  - Doors, windows, and traffic patterns
  - Floor components (wood, cement, carpet)
  - Obstacles in the search area to block, absorb, deflect, or pool odor
  - Air movement via heat, AC, wind, shadows/sunlight
  - Age of the source
- Inconsistent training criteria- keep your training patterns and criteria as clear and consistent as possible. If your dog becomes frustrated or confused, be prepared to back up to the last successful practice. *\*\*\*another reason for documenting practice sessions either in a journal or via an app on your phone.*
  - Avoid sporadic, poorly planned training sessions as this can confuse your dog
  - Create a consistent schedule and stick to it
- Using a rewarding reward- use what your dog finds value in to reward them, not just what is easiest. High value treats they only get during scent training, a favorite tug toy set aside for only scent rewards, and lots of verbal praise. If your dog doesn't like the kibble you're offering they won't be too motivated to earn it.
- Not trusting or believing your dog when they alert. Sometimes your dog's alert can look more like a question than a commitment. A trained final response (TFR) is sometimes forgotten in the moment but if the dog's body language is telling you they are at source believe them.
- Scent Complexity- Avoid complex scent challenges too early in the training process, only gradually increasing the difficulty level as they gain confidence and understanding.
- Foundation Training: A solid foundation is the key to a successful scent detection team. Do not rush through basic exercises. Consistency with criteria, expectations, and sessions will build skills faster than rushing your dog and having to go back later to build or reshape skills.