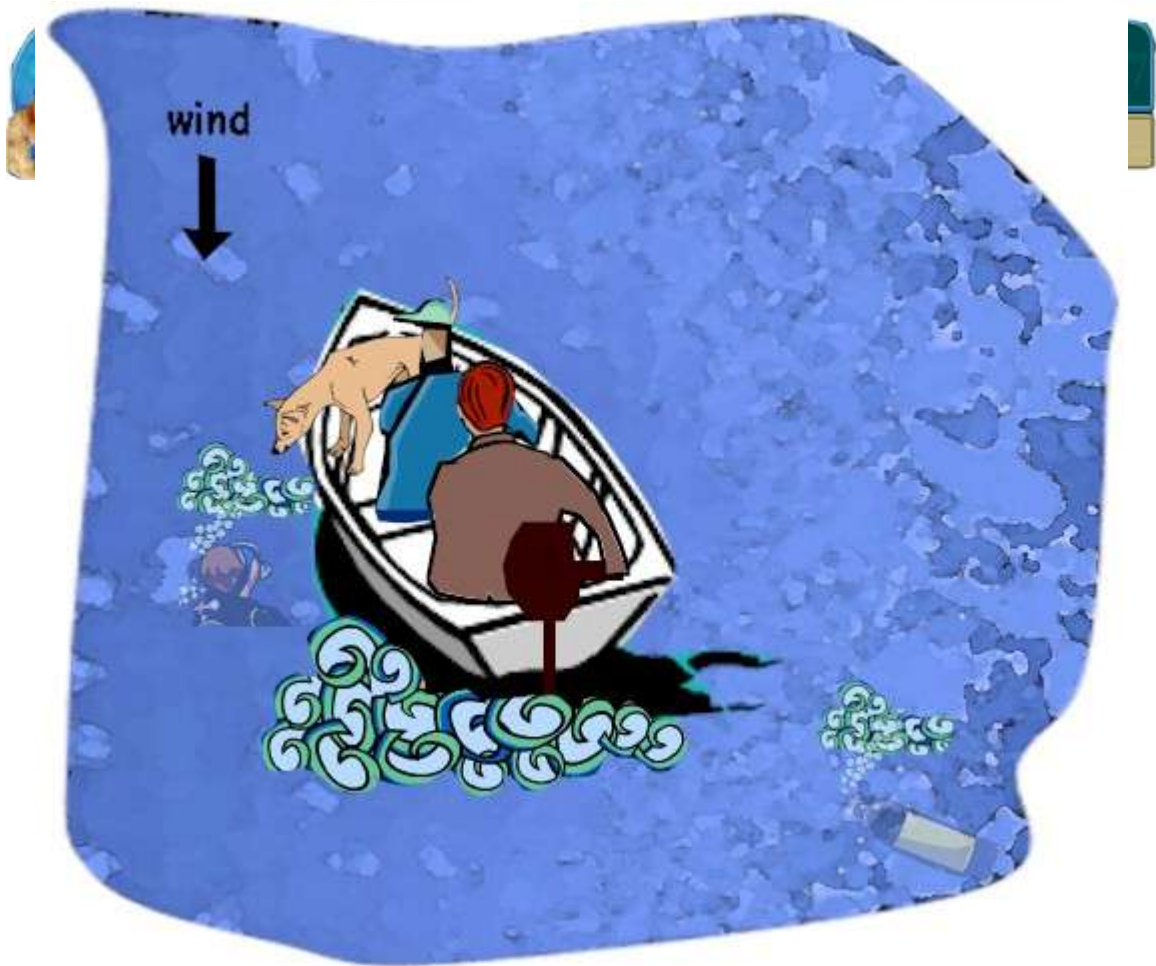


# Water Search Dog Training



**Jonni Joyce Seminars**  
[www.jonnijoyce.com](http://www.jonnijoyce.com)

Title: Water Search Dog Training

Lesson Purpose: To provide the student with an understanding of the steps in training a water search dog.

Student Performance Objectives: At the end of this block of instruction, the student will be able to achieve the following performance objectives in accordance with the information received during the instructional period.

1. List the steps used in training a water search dog.
2. Explain in writing the purpose of the Water Search Alert System™.
3. Explain in writing the importance of proofing.
4. Describe in writing the importance of training records.
5. Describe in writing using marking systems to locate the body.
6. Discuss the advantages to using divers in your training process.
7. Develop performance expectation guidelines for your unit.

Instructional Method

Lecture/Discussion/Practical

Prepared by:

Jonni Joyce

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I. Introduction

It was August 17, 1990. I had worked the night shift and was dead tired. I can remember crawling into bed and about the time I fell asleep the phone rang. It was Lt. Parlett. "We've got a drowning. I need you and Breston to

report to Lake Upchurch. I know you just got home but you've got to go anyway."

Lt. Parlett was the canine supervisor. He was a tough, but fair leader that believed in the dogs and their abilities. The canine program was relatively new to our department and had been through some ups and downs. Parlett was willing to take on the mission and make it work. He was dedicated.

What was to follow changed my perspective on canines and became a changing point in my career as a law enforcement canine handler. I spent the next four days on Lake Upchurch attempting to locate a 15 year old that had driven his jet ski into the side of a boat. Until that time, I believed that the training methods of my master trainer were solid and unbeatable. Indeed, I believed that we had the best dogs in the state and the best master trainer.

Our dogs never alerted on the body and it surfaced on the fourth day of the search. I went to Parlett. "We've got a training issue to deal with." It was at that time that I realized that the training provided by the master trainer was insufficient in teaching the canines the complicated endeavor of water search. Basic steps and foundation work had been omitted and shortcuts were taken. The result: failure on Lake Upchurch.

I worked 23 out of 24 hours on August 17, 1990. It was my 27<sup>th</sup> birthday. I made a commitment to myself, my unit, and the citizens that I served that never again would our dogs fail on such a mission. After leaving the department in 1991, I developed a comprehensive training program for water search canines.

I've always told my students that you learn more from your mistakes than you do your successes. Learn from them and move on and don't make the same mistake twice.

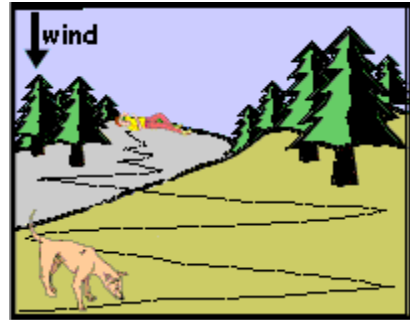
I hope my training program will assist you in your endeavor to field professionally trained working dogs that have proven reliability in the specialty of water search.

## II. Body

In order to fully understand how to train a water search dog, one must understand the training of specific scent work. Water search is more similar to the training of a detection dog then it is to an air-scenting dog or

trailing dog. Your scent source is hidden and masked and in order for you to be successful, your dog must give you an indication or alert that pinpoints that scent source.

In trailing, your canine follows a human scent from point A to point B. Point A is the Point Last Seen (PLS) or Last Known Point (LKP) and point B is the location of your victim/suspect or the location where the scent source ends. In air scenting, the canine conducts a search until it crosses the scent cone of the human and then follows it in to the human. In both trailing and air scenting, the search pattern is controlled and directed by the canine.



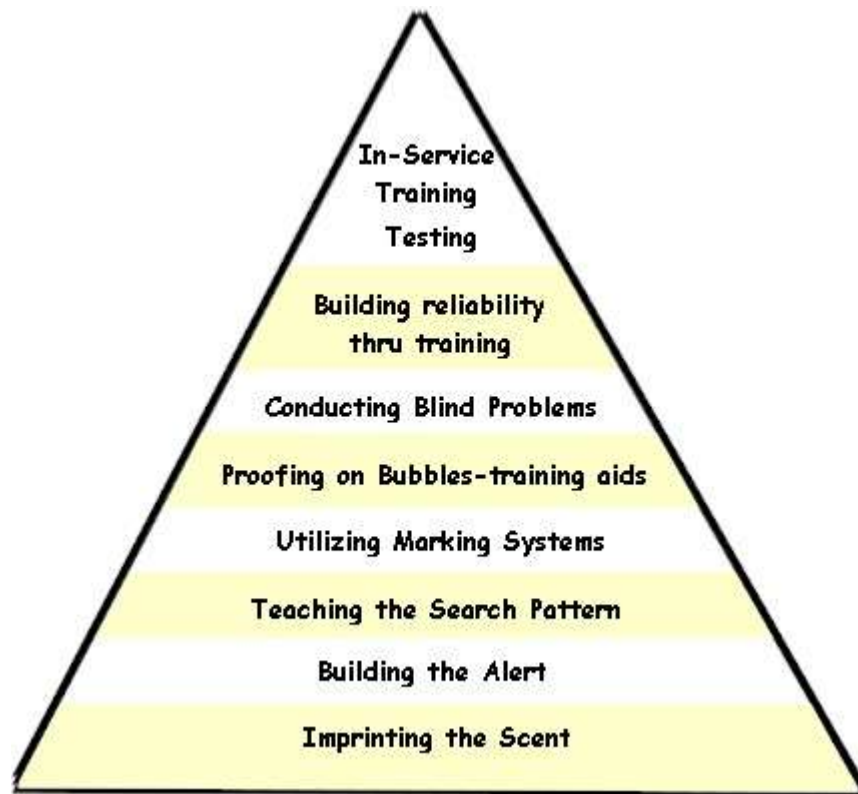
In water search, the boat controls the canine's search pattern. A specific search pattern is used. The body is concealed and masked by other odors. The canine must give us an alert that lets us know the strongest point of scent. The handler must then take into account water current and wind conditions in order to accurately advise the divers the location of the body.

This is a scent specific search, similar to a narcotics search. In a narcotics search, the canine handler controls the search pattern. The narcotics are concealed and not readily accessible to the canine. The narcotic odor is masked by other odors requiring the canine to discriminate between scents. We teach a specific alert behavior that we can testify to in a court of law that the dog reliably performs under controlled conditions when conducting narcotic searches. This alert can be passive or aggressive. The handlers must take into account air currents in order to accurately advise the location of the narcotics.

In order to successfully teach specific scent work to a working canine, there are a series of steps that should be followed. Each of these steps will be discussed in length in the context of conducting water search. Scent work steps include:

- ❑ Imprinting the Scent
- ❑ Building the Alert
- ❑ Teaching the Search Pattern
- ❑ Utilizing Marking Systems
- ❑ Proofing on Bubbles-training aids

- ❑ Conducting Blind Problems
- ❑ Building reliability thru training
- ❑ Testing
- ❑ Continual In-Service Training



**Water Search Dog Training Pyramid**

**A. Imprinting the Scent**

The most difficult search for a dog to conduct is water search. The reason is relatively simple.

*“If the paws ain’t moving, the mind ain’t working.”*

In almost every other form of search, the canine controls his own search pattern. In a water search, the canine cannot control the search pattern because he is a passenger in a boat. It is an unnatural feeling for the dog. He is used to directing his own search by following his nose into the scent source. In water search, the canine must rely on the driver of the boat to “follow his nose.” If the driver and handler miss the cues, then the dog becomes confused as to what his purpose is. This is why it is imperative with a young dog to follow the basic building blocks for scent imprinting so the dog has little time to become confused.

Also, this process teaches the canine that there is something under the water to look for. A canine who is trained on human scent may well understand when he goes into the field that he is looking for scent, but put that same canine in a boat and he must be taught there is something out there to look for. Once the dog understands there is something out there to look for, then his natural instinct of using his nose to locate his quarry will take over.

There are several different ways to imprint drowned victim scent upon a canine. We begin the process with divers. The reason we start our training with divers is that on the very first day of a search for a drowning victim, that victim will smell more like a diver than the aged land cadaver material that is also used in water training.

I like to find the victim on the first day, if possible. So, I train my dogs on divers. A diver puts off a large quantity of scent, just as a drowning victim will do. Pseudo scents and cadaver material do not put off as much scent. I use them during the training process, but during imprinting I use divers.

Another benefit to using the diver is there is no question as to the location of your scent. The diver will produce bubbles. Taking into account current and wind conditions, you can estimate your scent cone. At this stage in the training the bubbles help to teach your dog that there is something under the water to find. The bubbles are an audible and visual cue to the dog. They allow the handler to identify the location of the scent, work the scent cone or pool and reinforce the canine’s natural curiosity.

The final benefit to using a diver is that the reward can come at the scent source. When starting a narcotics dog, we always allow the

canine to see the hide. A nylon bag protects the narcotic. The bag is partially visible. The canine is taken directly to the hide and rewarded by grabbing the bag and pulling it from the location. The dog is able to see the hide and the reward is immediate. As the canine progresses, the bag will become totally hidden and the dog will have to dig, bite, scratch or bark at it in order to be able to retrieve it. We use visual cues to help imprint the scent and build an alert.

In water search, the bubbles become the visual cue that helps us to teach the canine. Later in the training process, we will proof the dog on bubbles. If you use cues in training, you must always proof on those cues.

I teach water search on a lake or a pond. The majority of our drownings will occur on a lake or pond. Therefore, we teach the search technique here and become proficient at it before we add moving water.

The instructor should know the wind and current. The diver should be placed approximately 75 yards off shore and up wind of the search area. All spectators should be down wind of the search area. Always use the buddy system when diving. There should be another diver ready to respond in case your diver gets into trouble. This usually will be the line tender on shore. A system of calling the diver up should be in place. The “buddy com” or underwater radio communications is best. It gives you communication with the diver from the boat. Tying a line to the diver and having his buddy tend the other end on shore is also acceptable as long as the line does not float.

The diver should be placed on the bottom no more than 10-12 feet down.

Allow the diver to be submerged for five minutes before you begin the exercise. The dog should be free to move about the front of the boat but should not be allowed to go to the driver or the engine area. The watercraft needs to be stable and low to the water. We use a flat bottom Jon boat or v-hull Boston Whaler™. The dog will get three consecutive search problems. **The purpose of this exercise is to teach the dog that there is something under the water that he is supposed to find.** Hopefully the canine will start to use his nose by the third time. We use the command “*fish*”™.



The handler should command the dog to “fish.” The boat driver should maneuver the boat into the wind and cut across the scent cone. If the dog notices the scent (normally demonstrated by throwing his nose and then dipping it close to the water), then the driver should turn the boat with the dog’s nose. Follow the dog’s nose. If the dog does not notice the scent, the driver should turn straight into the wind and head straight for the bubbles. The handler should verbally encourage the dog when he notices the bubbles. The diver should be signaled to rise from the bottom and when he comes to the surface the diver should reward the dog. THE DIVER REWARDS THE DOG. Floating toys or a tubular piece of food like a hotdog or beef stick works best. Something the diver can easily handle with dive gloves. The handler should praise the dog, verbally and physically as he takes his reward with ‘good fish.’



This process is repeated for two more repetitions. By the third time to the diver, the dog should be getting the idea and might start sniffing with his nose. The bubbles become a secondary reinforcer until the diver can surface and reward the dog. The dog is being reinforced for smelling human scent and noticing bubbles. The dog now understands there is something in the water to find.

After three repetitions, the dog should be rested and another dog should take a turn. Normally, your divers can work two-four dogs before they need to rotate out. It takes around 45 minutes to run two dogs.

The area along the shoreline should be kept free from dogs that are barking or playing. This would interfere with the training process for those who are working on water.

After all the dogs have completed the first exercise, then it is time to do it again. A dog learns thru repetition, praise, reward or correction. Most dogs show a substantial difference the second time around.

When the dog enters the boat, he should be excited about being in the water. You should see him throw his head high and air scent and then drop his nose to sniff at the water. He is searching for scent. The boat driver should drive the boat into the wind and cut across the scent cone.

At this point in the exercise, the handler should begin to concentrate on two things: the location of the diver and the body language of their canine when in the scent cone and when crossing out of the scent cone.

*“When my dog enters scent, he begins to wag his tail and he’ll bob his head. Then he dips it close to the water. When you cross out of the cone, his tail will stop and he will bend his head down closer to the water and then circle on the bow of the boat as if he lost it and will look straight at me or ahead with his head high.”*

The handler needs to pick up on this behavior and instruct the boat driver to follow the dog’s nose back into the cone. The instructor on shore should have radio contact with the boat driver and instruct the driver if the handler fails to pick up on this cue. This instruction should be passed on to the handler as well.

The boat driver should cut across the cone. The pattern that is being driven is called the “z” pattern. You work the cone as if you were drawing a “Z” across the cone and into the wind.

Once the dog has indicated that he is in the scent, he should be taken directly into the wind and the bubbles. The dog should become more agitated and excited. If you can elicit a bark, do so. The tail should wag more, the head should dip, and the dog might bite at, lick or paw the water. He might lick his lips. He might dance on the bow of the boat, trying to balance on the gunnels. Water breeds also might jump in at this point.



The debate on allowing a dog to jump from the boat and learn a

swimming figure 8 alert is one that is not going to be taken on in this manual. I allow my dogs to swim a lake or pond. Labs are infamous for this behavior. You can actually learn a lot about your mechanics of scent on the water by watching a water dog swim the cone/pool and alert on your scent source. It is an easily readable alert.

As the dog is offering all of this “alert” behavior, the diver should be called to the surface and the handler should be praising. The diver rewards the dog. Again, this is repeated three times.

On the first day of training, the dog has learned the following:

- ❑ There is something in the water to look for.
- ❑ The thing in the water has scent.
- ❑ My command is “fish.”
- ❑ This boat will take me to this thing in the water.
- ❑ If the boat is too slow, I can jump in.
- ❑ This thing makes bubbles.
- ❑ This thing is fun to play with when I find it.

END OF TRAINING DEBRIEFING:

1. What was the purpose of today’s exercise?
2. What did your dog learn?
3. What did you learn?
4. Are you ready to progress to the next step?

*“One of the most significant problems with in-service training is that there is no direction as to the purpose of the training session. Each time you leash your dog and head out to the training field, you should have in mind what it is that you are going to work on that day and how you are going to set up the exercise in order to address that problem. Each training session should have a purpose. When teaching a dog a new idea, each step has a purpose. Identify the steps, define the purpose, build the ladder and climb it until you achieve success.” (JJ, 1989)*

## B. Building the Alert

There are some natural behaviors that will develop in your dog during the process of teaching water search. Each dog could have a different alert or indication that speaks to the dog's individuality. We take these natural behaviors that develop in the canine when he becomes excited and channel them into a readable, identifiable, reliable alert.

Narcotics dogs do not begin alerting on the presence of drugs by biting and scratching. That is a natural behavior that we elicit from the dog and then channel into a reliable alert. One of the hardest behaviors to teach is to scratch on a locker. However, with patience and persistence the canine learns the behavior.

Some trainers have said that you build a 110% alert in training because in the real world, you are only going to get 75%. There is some truth to this statement. Your indication/alert on a real search will be lower key than in training because in training you are reinforcing the behavior and in a real search you are not. Therefore, it would be true that if you fail to teach this 110% alert and your dog has a low key alert in training, it will have a much lower intensity in the field.

I believe in teaching a very physically active alert and building that alert. It is easier for the handlers to read during testing and they will be able to see the indication their dog will give them in an actual search. The number one complaint that handlers have in water search is the difficulty in reading the dog and understanding what the dog is telling them. If we teach an aggressive alert, that addresses this problem.

In building the alert, **timing is everything**. You must reinforce the behavior that you desire. If your dog scratches at the bottom of the boat when in the scent, then that must be reinforced at that time. If your dog barks when in scent, then that must be reinforced. If your dog jumps from the boat and does a tight figure 8 alert over the diver's bubbles, then that is reinforced.

I like to teach a body posture alert. The dog is so excited about the scent and the diver beginning to surface that he is standing on all four paws on the gunnels of the boat like a trapeze artist doing a high wire act at a circus. His head is bent low with an arc in his back and his nose is pointing straight at the scent source. Prior to this the dog might have scratched at the water or boat (reinforced) or barked (reinforced) but the climax of the alert is his body posture.

In order to teach these behaviors, the handlers must be very animated. The handlers should be talking to the dog, getting him pumped up and

excited and praising when he does something right. The delay of the diver surfacing creates frustration for the dog and makes the alert even stronger. The handler must verbally and physically reward the canine during this process. The diver still presents the ultimate reward of the toy or the food.

In some dog circles, the handlers reward their dogs rather than the tracklayers or divers. In my training, the subject the dog is looking for always rewards the dog with the toy or food. This creates victim loyalty and independence from the handler. The dog does not focus on the handler for a reward and has his full concentration on locating his quarry for it is his quarry that rewards him.

Building the alert also helps the handler to learn to read the dog because he must reinforce the alert behavior. The instructor should be monitoring the exercise from shore and advising the boat driver and handler in reference to the dog's behavior.

The driver of the boat should cut across the scent cone, working into the wind. When this occurs, the dog should notice the scent and invariably the tail will start to wag. This tail wag should be reinforced verbally with a "good boy, where's your fish?" The dog will start using his nose to find the "fish". The boat driver passes out of the cone and the dog might dip his head looking for the scent and then throw his head high, again looking for the scent. The body posture changes because he is out of the scent. The head is high. He might circle on the boat. You know you are out of the cone. The handler should instruct the driver to turn back into the scent cone.

As you enter the cone, the dog should have moved his nose into the wind. As soon as he smells the "fish", you should see his body react. As the dog gets closer to the bubbles created by your diver, you will be able to see the reaction in his nose, head and body. Once he gets the visual cue from the bubbles then the boat should proceed to them. As your dog becomes more excited and whines, barks, paws, etc, reinforce those behaviors. The diver should be called to the surface and the dog rewarded. The handler should be praising like crazy and saying "good fish, good fish, good fish."

Points to remember:

1. We want the dog's attention on the diver.
2. We want the dog rewarded for every body posture that will help us read him.
3. We want the ultimate reward to come from the scent source, the diver.
4. Our role is to develop the behavior to make it a readable alert. We do this by reinforcing the behavior at the proper time.
5. An inexperienced dog and handler at this stage are a recipe for disaster. You must have a spotter on shore advising them what to do and when to do it.
6. There is no need to settle for a subliminal alert when in every phase of scent work, alerts are built into dogs.

This exercise should be repeated two more times with the same dog and then the dog should be rested.

Yes, even a bloodhound can be taught an alert. It will be different because it is breed specific. A bloodhound's head will bob just like any other breed but once frustration is introduced to the dog, the bloodhound will normally bay. A lab won't stay in the boat unless we make them. The Labrador, being a water dog, will soon learn that the boat just isn't quick enough to the diver and he will jump in and swim the scent cone. This is very impressive if you have never seen it. It also makes it real easy on the handler to mark the search area. The lab will locate the diver and swim a tight figure 8 over the diver and when nothing comes up (frustration) will bite at the water. It is then that we reward. The handler throws a ball from the boat to the dog or the diver releases a ball from the bottom of the lake. If the diver surfaces, he should take care in that the dog might want to greet him.

Teaching alert behaviors take into account the breed and natural tendencies of your canine. The dog chooses the behavior. We, as the handler and the dummies at the end of the leash develop it.

The Water Search Alert System™, which is explained later in this manual, is a wonderful tool to use to build an aggressive alert from the boat or land. The benefit to the system is that it rewards the dog at the scent source without having divers. It is easily deployed, weighs approximately 2 pounds and is carried in a sack the size of a ladies handbag. It is an invaluable tool in teaching the art of water search.

On the second day of training, the dog has learned the following:

- When I smell that thing in the water and wag my tail, my master likes it.
- When I get excited and whine or bark, my master likes it.
- When I stand on the bow of the boat and shake with excitement, my master likes it.
- When I jump in and swim to that thing in the water, my master likes it.
- When I bite at the water to taste the scent, my master likes it.
- When I find that thing in the water, it plays with me.

Building the alert is a motivational training phase that once accomplished, you will want to practice every once in a while. It reinforces the expected behavior in the dog and allows you the opportunity to practice reading your canine and reinforcing behavior. You can work on your timing and remember, **timing is everything**. It provides a quick reward for your dog and that is always motivational.

What if your dog doesn't give you any of these behaviors? If that is the case, then the only question becomes does your dog have an interest in the diver? If not, and that interest cannot be developed, then your dog might not be a water search candidate. If your dog loves the diver and getting the toy, it is a matter of watching the dog and seeing what behavior the dog offers to signal you that they are in the scent and then reinforcing that behavior. Canine training is persistence and patience. Don't give up on yourself or your dog until a trained professional advises you that your dog cannot learn this function.

### C. Proofing, Search Patterns and Marking Systems

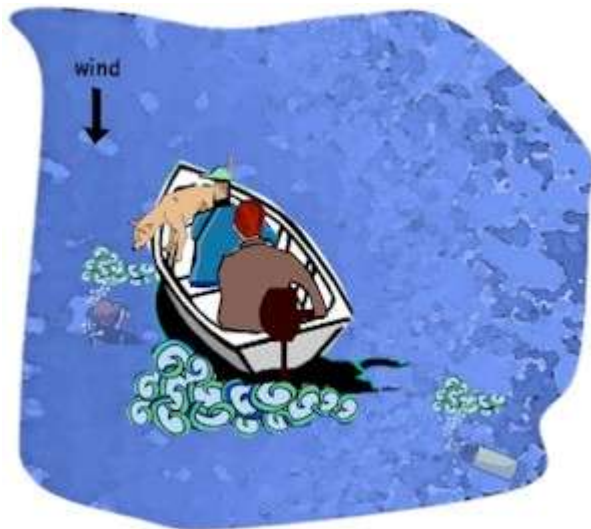
The next step in this process is to teach the handler how to mark the alerts so he can give the divers the highest probability of the location of the body.

***The entire point to conducting a water search is to locate the body.***

Up to this point, we have been teaching the canine to give us an aggressive indication behavior on the strongest point of the scent, the diver's bubbles. Now it is time to proof the canine on the bubbles and teach "walking the boat."

In a real search, there will be no bubbles. Every dog that comes through our training is proofed on bubbles. It is very simple to do and will ensure that your dog understands to alert on human scent only.

Have a diver place an SCBA tank downwind and to the right of the scent cone and place it on a slow leak. The diver should take a position upwind and to the left of the SCBA, making sure his scent cone does not cross over the dummy bubbles.



You may also use a scent generator with tubing that has never been utilized with cadaver material to make bubbles.

The dog is taken by the dummy bubbles first. 9 out of 10 do not show any alert behaviors. It is OK to notice and smell but it is not OK to give us alert behaviors. Most notice but do not indicate. The boat driver conducts the search pattern to the diver and instead of stopping at the diver to build the alert, he passes by the bubbles in his natural search pattern. The dog should, at this point, "walk the gunnel of the boat." That means traveling down the side towards the rear of the boat in order to stay in scent.



Some dogs must be coaxed off the front of the boat. This should be the only time during training you allow your dog to move behind you and towards the driver of the boat. If the dog is trained to stay on the front of the boat while searching and only travel down the gunnel as he comes out of scent, this gives us a readable, reliable behavior that tells us the location of the strongest scent source.

When the dog “walks the boat” the diver should be signaled to surface and should reward the dog on the gunnel of the boat.

This behavior, coupled with the aggressive indications that are taught, is easily read by the most inexperienced handler. In order to get to this level, though, this process should be directed from shore by a trainer or handler experienced in water search.

This exercise should be repeated two more times before the dog is rested.

Additional bubbles may be added. If at anytime the dog indicates on the bubbles, he should be corrected. First use a verbal correction and if necessary, correct with the leash and collar.

Once proofed on bubbles, the dog understands it is the human scent he is to locate. He is giving an aggressive alert at the scent source and walking the boat to let you know you have passed out of the scent. This is a very readable set of events that will occur on a real search.

One of the most important aspects of conducting a real water search is being able to determine where your scent is and where it isn't AND marking the scent cone or pool appropriately.

Working in a “z” pattern into the wind, you will want to mark both sides of the scent cone NOT every place you get an alert behavior. If you can imagine a triangle, with the two lower angles being the edge of your cone and the top angle being your bubbles or scent source, you will be able to visualize one marking technique. This triangle should visually create the top portion of an arrow, pointing into the wind and to the location of the body.

Your canine will give you alert behaviors when coming in scent. That should be noted during your search pattern. When your dog crosses the edge of the cone and STOPS giving you the body movements meaning he is in scent MARK that spot with a buoy.

You have now marked the outer edge of one of the sides of the scene cone (triangle). At this point, you should have directed your driver to turn back into the scent. When you get into the cone, note your dog's body language. Continue to work across the cone. When your dog STOPS giving you his alert behaviors MARK that spot with a buoy. You have now marked the outer edge of the other side of the cone. You continue to search into the wind, working the cone until your boat is almost straight into the wind. This means you are very close to the scent source. When you go past the scent source (bubbles in the case of a diver), your dog should "walk the boat." MARK that spot.

It is that last buoy, the one where the dog walked the boat, that you will call the location of the body. It is here that you must take into account your wind and water conditions with the help of information from the divers and advise them to search within \_\_\_\_\_ feet circumference of the buoy. This will take into account an up current alert, which does happen in the real world.

Dogs have been as close as two feet from the body in actual searches using this technique.

The best type of buoy to utilize is one that once deployed will not drift. A flat-sided fishing buoy can quickly be deployed and will stop spinning once the weight hits the bottom.

Another technique for marking large bodies of water is the utilization of a GPS. Also, compass bearings can be utilized being careful to triangulate one's position.

When deploying buoys, be careful not to throw them over the side of the boat, drawing the dog's attention away from his work. As the dog is searching, just lean your hand over the gunnel and place the buoy in the water.

During this entire process of search patterns, proofing and utilizing marking systems, the handler begins to become less involved in the reward process. During alert training, we are the catalyst in teaching the behavior. In a real search, we become observers. The dog must learn to independently offer alert behaviors without verbal coaxing by the handler.

#### D. The Water Search Alert System™

The Water Search Alert System™ was invented for two reasons. First, it gave us a way to conduct water searches when the water was too cold for the divers and secondly it eliminates bubbles but allows us to reward the dog at the scent source. I have also found that when used appropriately, it is a wonderful tool in building frustration for the canine.

The system is made of a 12” ABS plastic pipe with holes drilled in it and a screw on cap. A flotation device is attached to the pipe. Using an eyebolt, 8mm water rope is attached and threaded thru a pulley system that is attached to a boat anchor that is stationary on the bottom of the lake. The other end of the line remains in a helper’s hands on shore. We attached a small piece of plastic PVC pipe as a handle onto the 8mm rope with 4mm rope and a prussic knot. This allows the handle to be adjusted.

This system is easily deployed with a boat. Place your scent material into the pipe and have your helper on shore pull the system under just far enough that the handler can see the buoy but the dog cannot. We use a blue buoy for this reason.

The pulley gives the assistant on shore the ability to raise and lower the system, thereby peaking the dog’s interest and causing frustration. A water kong or other floating toy can be attached to the buoy.

When using the system in training, place your scent source in the ABS pipe and have the assistant on shore pull the system under the water. The blue buoy should be just far enough under the water that the dog cannot see it but the handler can. When first introducing the system, the handler should be very animated with their canine. Remember, we took the bubbles away so there is no visual cue for the dog. He must learn that he can still get rewarded without seeing anything.

When you are teaching a new concept or you add a new variable to the training process, remember you must drop back to kindergarten and make things simple for your dog. You must motivate your dog. Your dog might have reached the stage with divers that he is searching large areas and for a good length of time. Now that you’ve taken away the bubbles and put him on an alternate scent source, you have changed a variable and need to drop back to the beginning stages of training.

***Don't be afraid to drop back in training. If your dog has the drive to be successful, dropping back to easier problems will only increase his desire to work the longer problems. The mark of a successful trainer is to know when to drop back to motivational work and understanding that it doesn't reflect on the dog's work ethic. It is how they learn.***

The process is the same as running the dog on divers. The boat driver uses a "z" pattern. When the dog notices the scent, the driver follows the dog's nose straight into the system. The handler should praise the dog when he begins to give the alerting behavior. To really frustrate the canine and build his alert, the assistant on shore can "pop" the floatation device so it surfaces and then quickly pull it back under the water. This drives the dog crazy. The boat driver should pass the system and allow the dog to "walk the boat." The toy can be attached to the system and the dog rewarded at the scent source.

Do not let the dog chew on the floatation device. If he puts a hole in it, you will have to dive to get your system! I have actually seen pictures posted to the Internet of teams using this system and allowing their dogs to eat the float. Don't let your dog's eat your system! Good dog, bad handler.

#### E. Training the Handler: Lessons of a Master Trainer

Any experienced canine trainer knows that handlers are more difficult to train than dogs. Water search is the most complicated search for dogs and handlers to learn. The handler is behind the dog in the boat and has a very limited view. Observers on the shore who can see the side profile of the canine actually have a better perspective than the handler. This is why we recommend the use of spotters off to one side of the dog on a real search.

Handlers lack confidence. In order to build that confidence, the trainer must maintain a position of trust with his handlers. The handlers must believe that the trainer will never steer them wrong and will always help them to "see the light" without embarrassing them. In order for the team to function as a team, the trainer must be the one that the handler feels comfortable asking the questions, no matter how stupid they might seem. The master trainer need not be perfect, only perfectly responsive to the handler's needs.

**Master Trainer's Commandments**

**Trust thy dog.**

**Trust thy dog.**

**Trust thy dog.**

**And when you don't trust your dog, trust me.**



This position of trust is accomplished by always being honest with your handlers, never lying to them about their dog, pressing them to achieve the level of competence they are capable of, correcting them fairly in order that they learn, and always being there to support them even when they make mistakes.

The position of master trainer is a balancing act. You must challenge the handler: mentally, physically, and emotionally and bring them down when they are too big for their britches and build them up when they are too hard on themselves. This relationship must be strong or when you move into the next phase of training, blind problems, your handlers and dogs will have a problem.

**TRUST**

If your canine handler does not trust you, then he is going to believe that you have set him up for failure during a blind problem. Most handlers hate to be tested. However, that is a necessary evil in order to ensure that the handler can read the dog and function on a real search. I always tell my handlers not to worry on the first day of blind problems. They are not expected to be perfect. This is why we train. The mistakes need to be made here, not in the field. I videotape the training problems so the handlers can see what they missed.

The purpose of the blind problem is NOT to test the dog. You should know that the dog is capable of doing this successfully or you should not be at this level of instruction. The purpose of the blind problem is to build confidence in your handler, confidence in his dog, himself, and you. Therefore, it is imperative that he reaches a certain level of success but learns something along the way. As a trainer, you cannot let him fail.

I make the handlers talk to me by radio while the search is going on and explain what they are doing and why. I reinforce correct decisions with a "Good, carry on." If they don't notice a behavior they should, then I will ask them "What did your dog just do? Why?" The handler begins to watch their dog, intently, and reports every ear flinch, every nose action, and every change in the body carriage. This technique of providing support and the opportunity to ask and answer questions eliminates the chances for failure, makes the handler think and problem solve and become an active participant in the search function.

Blind problems should be used to build confidence and trust and should never be used to punish and embarrass a team member. Blind problems also allow you the opportunity to identify weaknesses in the dog team. Once those weaknesses have been identified, then you fix them during your training process. The handler will make mistakes and they will learn from them. This entire experience is the best way to prepare the handler for testing.

## F. Reliability and Credibility

Reliability is achieved through practice. The working dog is a canine athlete. If we expect him to perform, he must be in the field practicing. If you do not have time to practice, then you will not have a reliable dog. If Michael Jordan expects to score points on the basketball court, then he's on the court at practice. The same is true for the canine and handler.

In order to prove reliability, training records must be kept. These records should document weather conditions, water conditions, location of training, a small diagram of the search area and a narrative explaining what the dog did. Training records should also indicate what problems were identified, if any, and that they will be addressed in the next training session. It is imperative that the problem be worked on until it is solved.

Documenting problems shows two things: first that you are honest and secondly, your dog is not perfect. If you ever have to go to court to testify and you produce training records that do not document any problems that were fixed and how you fixed them, the defense attorney will eat you alive. Remember, the evidence that your dog discovers is not admissible unless you are capable of credibly testifying that the dog is reliable in that type search. It is your training records that validate the work history of your dog.

**Documentation = Reliability = Credibility = Conviction**

**If you did not write it down, it did not happen.**

Working canines should train at least twice a week and document all training on the appropriate training records forms. Water search canines should be trained at least once a month during the winter months and once every two weeks during the drowning season. No dog should be placed on an actual search until that dog and handler have proven that they are reliable and have passed certification testing.

### **Example of Water Search Dog Team Standards**

- The Certification testing will be done on a lake or a pond.
- The handler will be given a witness to interview who will provide a point last seen.
- The handler may choose his boat driver.
- The boat used is a rescue type boat (no canoes).
- The boat motor will be electric.
- The scent material will be Sigma Drowned Victim Scent or a scent source provided by the handler and secured in the water search alert system.
- The handler will have one hour to conduct the search.
- The area to search will be no larger than 10 acres.
- The handler must mark the area of scent.
- The handler must call the location of the scent material within 50 feet circumference and mark the location with a buoy.
- The dog must give a readable alert to the handler and the handler must recognize that behavior and advise the evaluator that the dog has alerted.
- The handler, boat driver, or evaluator will not know the location of the hide.
- Once the handler has called the location, they will come to shore. The evaluator will order the scent material to rise to the surface and a measurement will be taken to ensure it is within the specified distance.

***In order to qualify for certification testing, the handler must produce written training records that document over a period of time the training of the canine on water search. Documentation must include the use of divers and show that the canine has built a readable alert that is readily visible to the handler and evaluator. Training records should indicate what scent source was used and should show a progression of search pattern work that will mirror an actual search scenario. At least three blind problems should have been successfully completed prior to challenging the test.***

#### G. Water Dynamics and the Water Search Canine



For a review of water dynamics and utilization of K9 and alternative resources in locating human remains, see addendum I.

### III. Closing

The training of a water search canine takes a vast amount of commitment from the K9 handler. Using a step-by-step process, the handler can build a reliable indication and learn how to interpret the dog's body language in order to report with the highest probability of detection the location of the drowning victim to IC. Commitment to the training process will ensure a reliable, credible resource to assist in times of need.