

What is Talking Dogs Scentwork®?



TALKING DOGS Scentwork® (TDS) is about teaching your dog to find a specific scent. It is a free-flowing search style that allows a dog to cover complex areas efficiently and effectively. The handler works to support the dog and ensure the whole area has been cleared: ie there are no hidden articles remaining.

Talking Dogs Scentwork® would never have come into being were it not for a road trip conversation with my great friend, Sue Sternberg. Her suggestion that I offer some scentwork training was the first time I'd ever considered using the skills I'd learned as a drug detector handler for HM Customs & Excise (as it was called) with my pet dog clients and colleagues. On reflection, however, I realised that I'd always used it in informal ways: playing scentwork games to help dogs cope with stressful, exciting or distracting situations.

I began by introducing occasional small searches as a part of my adult dog training classes. Much to my surprise and delight, people really loved it! The dogs were animated

and excited about working, and their owners were amazed at the scentwork skill their dogs displayed. I quickly realised that in order to allow everyone to participate, I would have to adapt some of the techniques to suit those dogs who had not been specially selected for their high drive, confidence, and willingness to work. By incorporating parts of other dog training disciplines, such as gundog work, and being flexible with what they had to find (using food as well as toys), I developed Talking Dogs Scentwork®.

Within the dog world there are a variety of search styles, each adapted to a specific task. Search and Rescue (SAR) primarily uses air scenting in order to cover large areas. It would be ridiculous to ask a dog to sniff every blade of grass in order to find someone lost on a mountain, for example, so, instead, he must cast around to quickly find a scent he can latch on to; then off he goes with the handler following.

Working Trials search squares ask the dog to search alone for random articles that have human scent – sometimes their handler's;



Air scenting.

• **The scent picture**

First of all, the movement of scent – or ‘plume’ – is known as the scent picture, which can only be detected by the dog and not by the handler. Whilst it is thought that scent can exist in a vacuum, movement – usually caused by air – is required to create a scent picture or trail: where there is air and airflow, there will be scent.

For example, wind or breeze will carry scent, as will the air all around us. Have you ever been driving and suddenly smelt smoke? Is the car on fire? Is the engine going to blow? Once we’ve discounted these possibilities, we begin to look outside the car ... and then we see it, way in the distance: a small bonfire in someone’s garden. Airflow is what allows the

scent to reach us over great distances, and as smoke is one of the scents that is historically very important to humans, we are excellent at detecting and reacting to it.

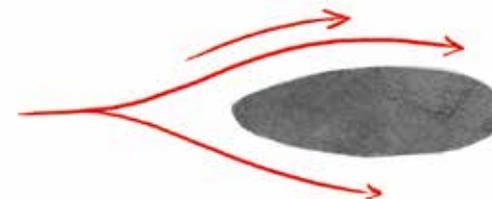
Air movement indoors is equally important, but more predictable. Each time a door opens and closes, a dog wags his tail, or a person moves through an area to hide an article for him to find, the air is disturbed and scent is circulated.

Temperature is extremely important in connection with scent. Hot environments distribute scent, making it large and fluid, whereas cold environments contain scents, making them small and more static.

Think of the gutsy smells that waft out of busy kitchens compared to the minimal odour of a cold store. The heat of a kitchen speeds up movement of the scent particles, causing the air to rise, and so draws out the scent and distributes it freely around a room. People moving around in the kitchen will also disturb the air, creating further distribution. This means that a dog is more likely to hit the scent early into the search, but might take longer to track it back to the source.

But in a cold store devoid of people, scent particles will move slowly. Cold air sinks so will take much longer to move away from the source, requiring a dog to carry out a more detailed search in order to pick up the initial scent, although, as it will be closer to the source, he should track it back faster. As a result, it could take the same amount of time to search and clear both areas, despite their very different conditions.

The scent picture will be affected if the search article is near a heater or a window; outdoors or indoors; if the weather is hot or cold; windy or still. The handler should be aware of temperature and movement of air, as the dog certainly will be! One of the best times to catch a glimpse into the invisible world of scent is when a dog is air scenting, as his nose



Smooth forward flow over a smooth object.

follows the scent trail as it moves through the air. Watch him as he tracks the scent of an animal in the woods ... or follows the smell of a roast as it comes out of the oven.

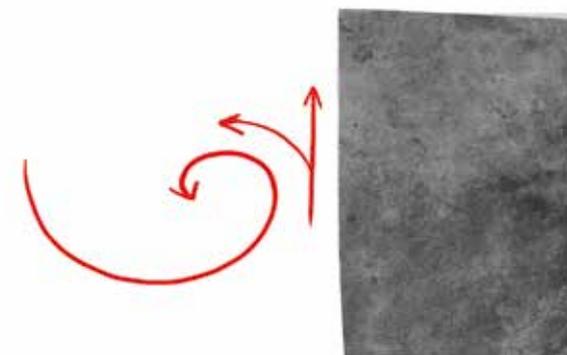
The Kinetic Theory of Gases tells us that particles move in a straight line until they collide with something. Depending on what this is, the scent will be distributed in a variety of ways, though will become weaker the further it travels from its source. As gases have many of the same properties as liquids, it may be easier to consider how water responds when it collides with solid objects.

When the sea moves over small objects

such as rocks or pebbles, the water simply flows over and under them, and so will air. Smooth objects allow the air to travel neatly over them without much disturbance, but hard edges tend to create small splashes that rise up and away as the water or air moves over the top of the object.

Consider where the water goes when the sea meets cliffs. It can’t go over the cliffs, so it comes into contact with them, rises up and out a little, and then drops. Water is heavier than air, of course, so drops faster, but air will behave the same way when it hits a wall, moving up, out, and down.

If the flow cannot through, around an object, it will travel upward falling back down





Open hand gesture.

(Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)



Open hand gesture when searching for cheese.

(Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)



Don't point! (Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)

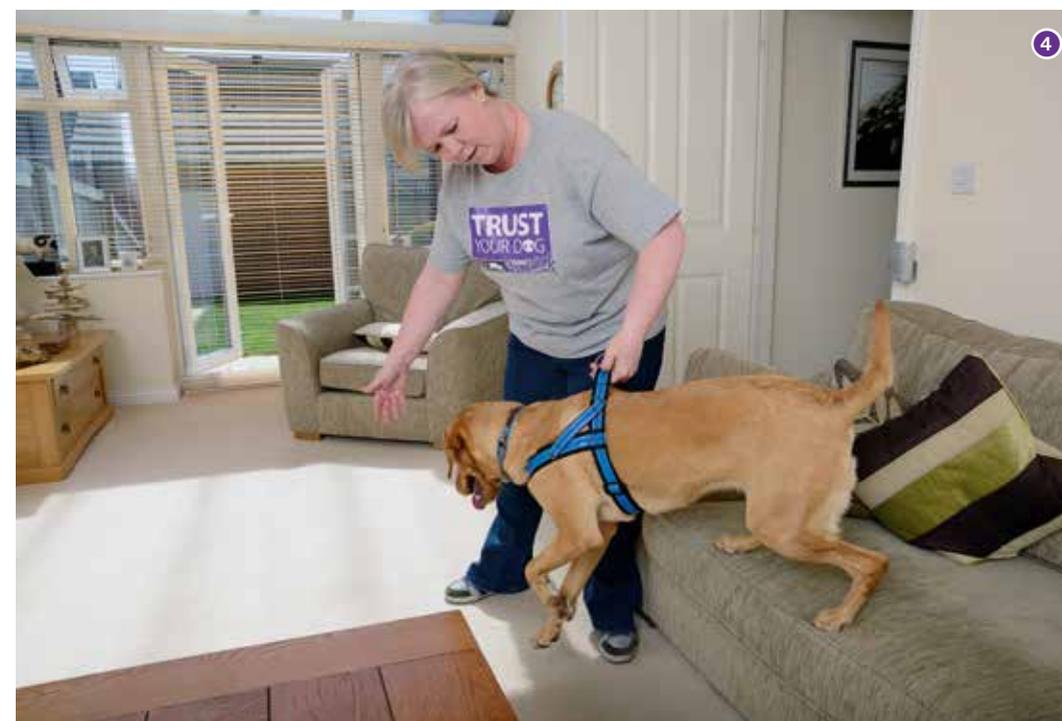
and not stiff and inflexible. Make it a natural movement to show your dog the area or article you'd like him to search, then move on.

When working your dog at height, or if asking him to jump up onto things such as tables, chairs, benches, unsteady mounds, etc, I recommend that he wear a harness.

There are many harnesses on the market, but go for a well-fitted, comfortable and supportive example that you can securely grasp the back off to take his weight as he jumps off things, and be ready to support him as he jumps up onto things. The classic Karenswood Breast Harness is a good choice as it's simple and strong (see the resources page for more details). **4**

Use a harness to support your dog as he jumps on and off objects.

(Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)



flow of the search will be interrupted whilst he waits for you to decide, which can result in an energy drop – and a frustrated dog. Conversely, if you go too fast and hurry your dog, he won't have time to search properly, so find a balance; wait for him to look up or towards you before you cue the next area. If you have a really speedy dog, do not worry. You won't have to run around after him if you position yourself well. Head for the middle of the search area to allow easy access to all areas in plenty of time. As your dog becomes more experienced and the searches become more challenging, he will naturally slow down.

1 Use a hand gesture to give your dog direction, and suggest areas and places that

might contain the article. Actually moving toward certain areas, reinforced by a hand gesture, is key to convincing your dog that he should work with you rather than on his own. He needs to know you can be of assistance, and the key here is *assistance* rather than control. **2** The hand gesture should be fluid and fleeting, and using the whole arm rather than just a hand gives a clearer signal. Simply pointing at areas to search is not clear enough, and may encourage the dog to look at your hand rather than in the direction you want him to. **3**

Specifically, the hand gesture should be like that used when showing someone to a seat, moving fluidly, with grace and purpose,



Bonzo grabs the mouse in the training hall during his first throw-in.
(Courtesy Wayne Holt)

are fine-tuning the final stages of working together.)

The mouse should be thrown into the room dead ahead of your dog so that he sees this, and also where it lands, and knows exactly where to go to retrieve it.

In order to maintain the energy, the instant you throw the mouse, give the search cue and release his harness. Your dog is set up for success; all you need do now is run into the room to play with him as soon as he picks up the mouse.

For Bonzo's second throw-in, the mouse is just around the corner instead of straight in front of him as he enters the room. (Courtesy Wayne Holt)



For step three, place the mouse behind something so that your dog has to use her nose rather than her eyes to find it.
(Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)

Cherry follows her nose to locate the scented mouse.
(Courtesy Bob Atkins/Your Dog Magazine)



Throw-in: step 2

Finish your game and take your dog back into the hall. Again holding his harness, throw the mouse back into the living room, but instead of throwing it straight into the room, throw it to the side so that when he runs in, he has to look to locate it rather than it being straight in front of him.

Give your 'Find it!' cue and release your

dog. Follow him in as before and play with him and the mouse.

Throw-in: step 3

Finish your game and take your dog back into the hall. Leaving him there, take the mouse into the living room, closing the door behind you. Place the mouse behind something on the floor that is just to one side, such as a

done later when your dog is confidently – and successfully – searching the postal sacks.

Source postal sacks from your local post office; sometimes your postman can help you out. or you can buy unused sacks, not necessarily postal – rubble sacks, for example – from many gardening shops, as well as online.

How to make the search thorough

One of the most common handler errors I see as teams increase the challenge is lack of attention to detail. Not being thorough can make the difference between your dog finding the article and missing it, but how to do that without going over and over the same area?

As ever, the answer is simple: watch your dog; really look at where he is sniffing; check if he runs past the area or if he actually works it. Does he physically move into the space but his mind is engaged elsewhere? To help your dog pay attention to all of the details, practice directed searches where the hides are dotted in and around those areas most likely to be missed during searches. These are often the corners, various heights (if you and your dog have been searching at high levels, lower search areas can be skimmed or missed, and vice versa).

Not moving/lifting/opening articles that retain scent, rather than allowing free airflow, is part of making the search thorough, as your dog will not yet be experienced enough to detect such small scent pictures. Overall, the most common mistake is for the handler to assume that the hide cannot be in a particular place, and so actively or subconsciously avoid it. Scent can be anywhere, but it's not the handler's job to find it: only to give their dog access to everything in order to ensure the area has been searched once, thoroughly.

Setting a time limit on searching an area can be a good way to ensure you are thorough and efficient. Repeatedly going

over areas or articles can deter a dog: asking your dog to search an area again, when he has already done so and knows it is clear, can be demoralizing for both of you. Remember to split the search area into manageable sections. Several smaller searches within the designated area allow you to complete each section then forget about it, freeing your mind to fully concentrate on the next section.

Advanced searches

At this stage you are providing your dog with very challenging searches, which, for some, may be a step too far. Dogs who can successfully work at this advanced level need to be confident, have a strong drive to work, and trust their handler to support them. If you find that your dog's motivation to search begins to wane as the searches become more difficult, go back to the level that he enjoyed, and work on providing variety at that level and below.

It's also important to remember that, just because the two of you can work at an advanced level, it's not necessary for all searches and finds to be at that level. Mix it up so that sometimes the finds are quick and easy, and at other times your dog has to search for a long time before finding anything.

Set the search level wherever it needs to be to –

- address an issue you want to work on or improve
- provide the most fun and reward for your dog

Advanced searches minimize the scent picture by using very small scented articles, such as scraps of material, small pieces of plastic piping, and lagging, and, ultimately, simply smearing the scent onto surfaces, or using scented labels to stick inside bags,

boxes and basins, and onto floors, furniture and fences.

Obviously, smaller quantities of scent give off less smell, make smaller scent pictures, and thus are harder to locate. Alternatively, hide larger articles deeper within hides: inside boxes inside bags, wrapped up, inside plastic and wood, deep inside full postal bags, or suitcases containing clothes, for example.

Elliot watches as Albert scans around to pinpoint the scent source ...



The better you understand scent and how it moves, the greater insight you will have into the level of difficulty you are presenting your dog with.

The handler's role is heightened at this level, too. Thorough searches are essential, so don't skip areas, cut corners, or assume it's a blank search. Scent that has been smeared onto a surface, or labels/slips of paper that

... and has it! He's looking right at the metal spanner that is the scented item. Clever boy!

