

Show Dogs Article

Sniffing out a good dog



Although both Paul and I have been involved in training dogs for more than 50 years between us, it was not until three years ago that we were introduced to the fascinating world of sniffer dog training. This all happened almost accidentally and started with a visit to Crufts.

As some of you probably know I write a column in Dog World and although it is mostly about Working Trials, when there are no trials on I do tend to generalise and write about other work related dog topics.

I have never really taken to dog showing but am very interested in working dogs whatever the discipline, and so when we visited Crufts a few years ago I was excited to find a representation from the National Prison Dog Service and decided to see if I could

find out more about what they do. By a lucky coincidence the officer in charge of the group Clive was from HMP Whitemoor which is not too far from us and, as a Category A prison, has both General Purpose Dogs as well as Search Dogs.

After chatting for a while and finding the subject so interesting I decided to take the bull by the horns and ask if I could go along to the prison and do an article on the dogs. I was delighted when he suggested I might like to do a series of articles on the intake, training and pass out of a new set of GP dogs and Handlers that were due to start in a couple of weeks.

This was miles better than I could have hoped for and just a fortnight later Paul and I turned up at the formidable prison gates. Unless you have had experienced of prison life before nothing prepares you for the stark reality of entering a prison and although since this first visit I have visited other prisons to do subsequent articles I never seem to get over the feeling of claustrophobia and panic that sets in as soon as I get inside, so I guess I am not the stuff of prison officers or prisoners for that matter. Luckily we only had to go as far as the metal lined reception and have our identity checked by the officer behind the hatch and then we were back out in the fresh air and heading round to the training ground to meet the officer in charge of the dog section and his new handlers. It is funny but after a few visits we completely forgot about the prison that loomed over us while we watched the training, and standing with your back to the high wall we could have been anywhere with any dog handlers.

We were introduced to the three new handlers and their dogs and learned about the previous lives of both the dogs and the handlers. For the most part dogs were gifted from the public who couldn't cope with their boisterousness and/or drive, although sometimes they came from other services like the Police because they were too strong or unstable for street work. One of the handlers was already an experienced dog man but the other two, although serving prison officers were new to the dog section.

We were fascinated and enthralled watching these three dogs go from raw recruits to licensed prison dogs in just a matter of weeks, and we also had plenty of material for my articles. That may well have been an end to it but a year or so later we were again invited to Whitemoor but this time to watch the sniffer dog training and to say we were hooked is an understatement. Probably because the GP training is so similar to what we do for trials in general and more specifically the PD

(Patrol Dog) stake this did not amaze us as much as the sniffer dog training which was totally new and incredibly interesting, and Paul declared there and then that this is something he wanted to do. I think we must have been a bit overwhelming with our questions which were far and above the information needed for an article, and eventually head trainer Ian, realised what we were after and gave us all the information we needed and suggested we give it a try, as the prison service is always looking for good green dogs.

That is all the encouragement we needed to embark on a totally new venture and several months and quite a lot of money later, after our CRB checks, the installation of a safe and monitored intruder alarm system, police check and a thorough inspection by the Home Office Inspector we were granted our Home Office Drugs Licence and could purchase the substances we needed for training. That is when we acquired Jack a 16 month fox red Labrador who was both our teacher and our first success, and when he went off to Leicester Police and was licensed almost immediately, we felt an immense sense of pride.

Since then we have had both Labradors and Spaniels and Dex, Sam, Moss, Bob, Danny, Bomber, Alfie and Woody have all gone on to search for drugs or explosives with the Police or Prison Service, and we are very proud of all of them. However, not all dogs make it and we have also had Charlie, Billy and another Woody that have had to be found good pet homes as for one reason or another they just weren't good enough.

The one thing we have learned since embarking on this new venture is that there is nothing clever about training sniffer dogs, the skill comes in finding the right dog to train and it really doesn't matter if it's a dog or a bitch, a Spaniel or a Labrador or even some other equally driven breed, it's all about the temperament, attitude and drive of the dogs, and that cannot be made and it cannot be masked, it is what the dog is, and when things get difficult it is these dogs, with that little bit extra, that will still be working.

At present we do not have any dogs in as we are still looking for that special one which we may find this week or not for several months, but we are getting much better at spotting them so our failure rate is less, and we are getting a bit of a name for ourselves with the services, if not for quantity then certainly for quality, and it is this standard that we are determined to maintain.



It only remains to say that all our search dogs as well as our own trials and breeding dogs are fed on CSJ

Three of our dogs
(posted 13/03/2013)