

Search & Rescue Rottweiler Handler Spotlight: Sharon Ward



Interviewed By Jack Fields

Going where not many have gone before

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Not many Search and Rescue handlers deploy Rottweilers. This is a breed not normally associated with search work. When people think of Search and Rescue, they have visions of Labrador Retrievers, German Shepherds and, of course, Bloodhounds. A few years ago, I began researching and looking for Search Dog handlers who have certified Rottweilers. I found some but they are far and few between. The good news is that the handlers who I talked to had not only certified their current dogs, but many of them were on their second or third certified Rottweiler. It is important to note my use of the word "certified". Certification is a vital part of what I am looking for. Just as there are many people who train for Schutzhund, the percentage of people who actually title their dogs is much smaller. So having an SAR dog in training is great, and I am excited about it, but actually finishing the dog and getting into the field is another story. I continue to look for proven SAR Rottweilers. If you know of any please email me as I would love to talk to the handler and add them to my list!

Several years ago while training in Oregon, my friends discovered a Rottweiler at the local Search and Rescue training event that they were attending. The handler was Sharon Ward. I contacted her immediately because I was excited to add another Rottweiler to my list of Certified SAR Rottweilers. She was very helpful and had great advice for me when I was working toward certifying my own Rottweiler. I asked her if it would be possible to conduct an interview with her and she agreed. Following is a transcript of that interview:

Hey Sharon. First off I would like to thank you for your time and agreeing to an interview. Could you tell us a little about yourself and what you do?

I actually do a couple of different things. I am an operational member of a team called Pacific Crest Search Dogs. I also

work with another team, which is not a canine team. It is a search team though. It is Cowlitz County Search and Rescue. I use my dog with that team but it is not a canine-specific team. I am also what is called a "sign cutter" which is a master tracker with Joel Hardin Professional Trackers. So I have been doing Search and Rescue since 1998. Before that I worked with Protection dogs and Obedience dogs. So since 1998, I have been working with Search and Rescue, but I have owned Rottweilers since 1982. I have had a full on history with them since then.



Multi Certified Pepperhaus Z Kunga

Have you trained Rottweilers for other dog venues?

Yes, for protection and obedience.

Was it Personal Protection, Schutzhund or some other dog sport?

No, it was Personal Protection.

Cool. I see.

I lived in Boston at the time, so it was quite a different venue than the Northwest.

How did you become involved in Search and Rescue?

Actually, it is a funny story. I had this big beautiful Rottie. He was a 120-pounder. He loved everybody. I was trying to do competitive obedience, and do you think that in the long sit or long down that I could get that darn dog not to break and go visit the Pomeranian four dogs down? No matter what I did that dog could not do it. You know, he was a beautiful intact male and every strategy I tried; well he just drove me insane. Finally, this friend said to me "Why don't you run him for ten miles? That will calm him down." That is how I got into Search and Rescue. I needed a job for this dog that otherwise was driving me crazy.

Excellent. Yes. It seems like you either have people who have a dog and get interested in Search and Rescue (or some other dog genre) and have that dog fit the role. It is rare that someone finds a dog interest and then finds a dog to fit the role. It is usually that I wanted something to do with this dog that I have.

Yes, I was aware that I needed a working dog. I always had working dogs. I just did not have the right job for this particular dog. That being said, I agree with you that he was basically a medium drive dog. He was not an excellent dog, but I worked him really hard and he became operational and he had a find



On the job at Mt. Saint Helens



Pepperhaus litter bred for SAR

or two. After that, I started becoming much more careful in what I was looking for in a dog and I started to shop the parents. Now I am on my third Search dog, both of whom I picked based on their parents. I want that bitch, and that dog because that will give me the structure and the drive that I am looking for.

Nice. Yes, it seems like with the second dog, one is more aware of what they are looking for. People tend to research things better.

Right. My third dog was planned. The breeder, Sandy Stuart of Pepperhaus Rottweilers, is a member of my search team, and we looked specifically for a pair who would produce the type of dog we wanted. Because we were looking for a Search Dog litter, we talked about and decided to keep the tails. I never realized how helpful the tail is in reading the dog.

Makes sense. I know I have become really good at reading stumps over the years, but I know many Rottweiler owners who now have tails and they say the same thing. We have a litter coming up and are planning on keeping tails. It is going to be a transition for me. Did you have any resistance showing up to search training the first time with a Rottweiler?

I did not but I think the Northwest is different compared to California in that regard. It has been more of an issue lately, in the last couple of years, than it was early on. I think early on they were not as well known and I have had missions where I would say to the Deputy Sheriff, "Oh crap, I forgot something in my truck, will you hold him for a minute?" At first they would take a step back, but agreed. I would come back ten minutes later and they would say, "Hey would you take my kids for a couple of weeks?" because the dog was so well behaved. So we won them over! I have actually been to searches where the SAR Coordinator, or the Deputy, did not want any dogs on the search, but would see me there and say, "You can work him," because I had worked to establish the reputation.

Beautiful. Yes, that seems to be the battle we have in California. It seems like we are changing opinions one person at a time. Well, the proof is in the find. You know, you do the job. We are quite serious. We have GPSs on our Air Scent and Cadaver dogs. We run our dogs with GPSs in their harnesses.

Nice.

When we come back in from the field, we download our info right to the I.C.'s (incident Command) computer, and we can say this is where our dog was.

That is awesome. Yes, we are starting to see more and more teams using GPSs in California. I do some consulting for the Ventura County team and they use them as a standard tool. With my own dog, I have been contemplating going to that set up. Right now I can use my GPS to know where I have been, but I am only "guesstimating" about where my dog has been. When there is also a GPS on the dog, you get a much better picture of where you have been as a team.

Yes, then Search Base can see that you have covered your area. The thing about that though is that you are putting your reputation on the line because darn it, if the person is in there and you cleared it... It is an interesting challenge.

Yes. I agree.

Our team is very big on accountability, and you must stand behind your work, and that is what we do.

That is great, and as it should be. What do you feel are the strengths and or weaknesses of the Rottweiler in Search and Rescue?

I will sum up the attitude. For example, there are the Labrador Retrievers who are happy-go-lucky. They will go find the person and then take a quick dip in the water as they race back to tell you they have a find. A Rottweiler's attitude is very different. They will look at you and say, "Tell me once what you want, shut up, let me work, wait in the car and I will come back when I got them". I like that "look you in the eye" attitude. Next is structure. The dog must have good structure and the dog must be fit...MANY dogs have too much weight for Search and Rescue. My dogs are about 85 lbs. So they are little guys compared to present day show Rotties. Third, they must have good temperament and strong drive.



Kunga doing demo at the Washington State SAR Conference

Yes. I am running a 63 lb female.

Yes, that is great. They have the agility. You know you get these big 120-pounders like my first one. Boy, he was like a bull in the woods. You know (Boom, Boom, Boom). These more agile ones just fly over things. It is pretty amazing. So you have good structure and you have good temperament of loving everybody, and you have that drive, "Where is my ball, Where is my ball?". Then you have that really nice working dog.

Are there any particular weaknesses with the exception of size, as you were saying? I know the 120-pound anything is not the ideal candidate.

Well, I will tell you I have seen a great variance in the Rottie, but my current young pup...that black coat...he is heat intolerant.

Yes, that can be an issue

He does not do well in that hot sun. So my mitigation for that is I got one of those Zen-tek coats. I do not know if you have ever seen one? They are made of space age airplane material that basically keeps the dog about 10 degrees cooler than he otherwise would be. So that is my mitigation on the heat issue.

Yes, I have been researching the different cool vests, and thinking should I go here? But I have not talked with enough people who use them to really make up my mind and decide which product to go with.

Well, I will tell you that I have had four different vests, and I really like the Zen-tek. I did an experiment and took my dog's temperature with it on sitting in the crate and then with it off 30 minutes later and with the coat on there was a 10-degree difference. I ran a trail from yesterday and it was 75 fahrenheit. I put the Zen-tek coat on under his trailing harness and he did fine.

Sweet. Yes, I need to look more into it. Like your area, our area can get quite warm.

We do not get as warm as California but we do have some hot days.

Yes. California can get hot! Is there anything you do differently when training a Rottweiler for Search and Rescue that you do not do with other breeds?

Well, you know every breed is different. For example, the Bloodhounds are a class completely to themselves. Some people are not into disciplining a Search dog, but if my dog is out of line he is going to get discipline. There is none of this, "Well, he is searching so no discipline." If he is not doing his job, he is going to be disciplined. I am not saying beating him with a stick, but he is going to sit when told, he is going to come when told, and down when told.

I totally agree. We always say Search is an exercise in obedience. Well at least amongst our inner circle. We tend to have way too many debates in the industry about such things. It is a "Tale of Two Cities".

People who say you cannot impose any discipline on dogs while searching end up with an unruly dog who is not reliable.

We have already talked a little on the subject but to reiterate; what do you look for in a potential Rottweiler SAR prospect?

Without the structure you have nothing. Without the drive you have nothing. For example, I started watching my latest pup from the day he was born. I nicknamed him "The Turd Hunter" because he would hunt out rabbit turds in the yard, and it did not matter how many times we took them and hid them or put them somewhere else; he would find them. He would work until he found them. This is the kind of drive I am looking for... that hunt drive; not just the prey drive of chasing something that is tossed, but the hunt drive. "I am going to find it! I am going to find it! I am going to find it! You cannot hide it from me!" This is what I am looking for, and also the thing that people around here laugh at me about. I look for a puppy who will go out in the rain. Some puppies, if it is raining, they will not step in a puddle; they do not want to go outside. I want the puppy who does not care

if it is raining, because we have rain nine months out of the year where I live.



Sharon Ward & Kunga

Makes sense. At what age do you like to start training for Search and Rescue?

I start them at eight weeks, but I do not start them on hard work, I start imprinting the behavior. For example, I do a runaway "Good boy!" If it is cadaver and he puts his nose on it, "Good boy!" Nothing serious, just imprinting the behavior so that when I come back to it when he is six months old, there is some recognition.

What is your perspective on the single-discipline dog compared to the multi-discipline dog? There seems to be a lot of debate over which way we should be training.

It depends on your time availability, because each discipline takes a significant amount of time. For example, it is 18 months minimum to train a reliable Trailing Dog. One thing I do not believe in is that you can train all disciplines at the same time. You cannot train Air Scent, and Trailing, and Cadaver all together. I think if you are going to have a multi-discipline dog it should be taught in different sequences. Maybe it is different if you are a full-time trainer and can train all day long, but we do not have people like that in our group. All of our people have other day jobs.

Yes. I think that is the typical SAR Dog handler.

I run trails four days a week and I have a full time job. I do not see how I can train more than that at the moment. My older dog is cross-trained. We did wilderness first and then we did Cadaver and that seems to work fine. We do have dogs on our team who are single-discipline. They get it quicker and they are really good. So it is hard to say. I can see both sides of it. Basically, Cadaver is air scenting for a specific scent.

Yes. I tend to straddle the fence. I can see both sides and I agree with you. A lot of it is just the handler's ability, but mostly it is time.

This is true. If one does not have the time to train, one cannot just train it and believe it is ok and they are now finished with that area. One needs to continue to reinforce it, and unless you have a whole lot of time on your hands that is pretty hard to do.

Yes. I agree. Please check back next issue for the continuation of this interview. Join us as we talk about some interesting topics including knowing when it's time to retire your SAR dog, trailing vs. tracking as a foundation for the trailing dog, and we get to take a peek at one of Sharon's most memorable searches!