

The Rottweiler and Search and Rescue



By Jack Fields *It's not about winning or losing, but about living and dying"* Dr. Masaaki Hatsumi

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Jack Fields lives in Central California with his wife Amy, daughter Bryanna and their Four Rottweilers. He has been a professional dog trainer for the better part of 24 years. He has trained dogs for a variety of roles from Schutzhund to AKC performance. Jack is a certified Wheel Chair Assistance Dog instructor, and also oversees the training of Animal Assisted Therapy dogs. Over the last 8 years he has been involved in Search and Rescue. He has trained and or consulted for numerous State and County agencies at the current time he is training his young Rottweiler Java with the California Rescue Dog Association.



Inca vom Fields Haus cools off during a long training session.



Java vom Fields Haus & Jack Fields

winning or losing. As you train you realize this is very much about "living and dying". If your dog doesn't perform well, it is not about going back to the club and working on your issues and preparing for the next trial. It takes only one time seeing the look in a missing persons family members' face to understand the seriousness of this work. People are counting on you. Your team is counting on you. It must be right the first time because someone's life may depend on you and your dog! This work is not for everyone, nor is it for every dog. It takes a special kind of person who is willing to dedicate a tremendous amount of time and money so that "Others may live". Training usually requires a minimum two-year commitment, with just as much training going into the human component of the team as well as into the dog. You will train in all weather conditions (no fair weather only trainers here), and will push your physical limits as well as your dog's. We refer to it as a "journey", and when you have finished it you will look back on it and feel as if you have completed something close to a "rite of passage". Your reward will be more training, more expense, and more work. Then when it's zero dark-thirty and the pager goes off because somewhere out there someone is lost, it is you and your dog on the front lines, and for me that is what it is all about!

Many breeds of dogs are utilized in Search and Rescue. There is always the "what works best", or the most common breed being trained. When I did Schutzhund people used to tell me get a "German Shepard." When I did AKC Obedience they told me to get a "Border Collie." Why should I think any different about the world of Search and Rescue? I take pride in doing things with my Rottweilers that people say just is not done. Our breed is not as one-dimensional as non-Rottweiler owners might think. I always smile when I hear people say, "Oh is that a Rottweiler? I've never seen one do that!" It allows my dogs and me a great opportunity to open people's minds, and to show that our breed is not the monster that many people expect them to be.



An ambulance dog from 1915-1919

Search and Rescue work takes a special kind of person. The work demands more than a training commitment, it is a life style. You will get out of your training what you put into your training. When competing in dog sport, no matter what the genre, it is about the winning, either in showing, getting that V Rating, finishing a Champion or getting that Schutzhund, or AKC title. It is always, "what was the score, where did you place?" It's always how do I get a better score or placing than the last time. It usually boils down to the "winning or losing". Search and Rescue though is not about

You can see by the dog's jacket on page 1 (called a Shabrack) that it is an Ambulance Dog. These Ambulance Dogs were the foundation of modern day Search and Rescue dogs. When I came across it, I was ecstatic to see that it was a Rottweiler! After doing much research and talking to many people in the industry, I was disappointed to see that there are currently not many certified Search and Rescue Rottweilers in this country. The few handlers who do have certified Rottweilers are not on their first Rottweiler Search Dog, but their second or third certified dog! These handlers have only positive things to say about our breed doing this kind of work. This was very encouraging to my wife and me because we felt that we were entering into rough territory. I have always felt that my pup was on schedule and doing good work and I often received compliments, however, there were always naysayers in the background questioning why we were working Rottweilers.

Of all the things I've done with my dogs, Search and Rescue allows me to really make a difference in my community. For me this is my motivator, but being able to have my Rottweiler help me in this task is the icing on the cake! We are changing perspectives one person at a time, and showing others that this breed too cannot only get the job done, but do it well!

If you are thinking, "Hey, I might like to check out Search and Rescue with my Rottweiler and see if it is for us" then I hope you understand how vital it is that we are very aware of our dogs' temperament and trainability. It would be a shame if many Rottweiler owners rushed out and started doing Search and Rescue training with the wrong dogs. We potentially could do more harm than good for our breed and its reputation. The few Rottweiler handlers who have gone before us have done an excellent job of training and promoting our breed. So even though we are making progress it would not take much to convince those in the Search and Rescue community that this is not a good breed for Search and Rescue operations



Sharon Ward & Kinga representing the breed in Pacific Northwest

As with any dog considered it must be the right dog. Just as not every dog is right for Schutzhund or Conformation so is true of Search and Rescue. We must be our own hardest critics, and select only dogs that can truly represent the potential of our breed in this most of challenging work.

So if I've got your interests sparked, what is the work? Search and Rescue is a very broad term. In some parts of the country it is referred to as Search and Recovery. Most people in the industry simply refer to it as SAR. The Wikipedia encyclopedia reference to Search and Rescue Dogs states: Search and Rescue (SAR) dogs detect human scent. Although exactly what this means to the dog is not known, it may include skin rafts, evaporated perspiration, respiratory gasses, or



Java in scent, powers towards the subject

decomposition gases released by bacterial action on human skin or tissues. Search and rescue dogs are typically worked by a small team on foot, but can be worked from horseback.

Ok, that is a little dry, but does hit the point. Search Dogs are trained to detect human scent. Be it live scent (the scent of a living human), or the scent of decomposing human remains. I find it very interesting that we are even now using dogs in Archeological human remains detection. In California, my friends with ICF (Institute for Canine Forensics) are using dogs to detect human remains that are thousands of years old. So the SAR dog uses its nose, to detect a trained target (scent) and then alerts the handler to its presence. Be it live or deceased depending on its training. Sound simple? You'd be amazed at what seems so simple can be so complicated!

We break SAR dogs down into several categories. Many times we refer to what the dog is trained for as a discipline. The Discipline would be for example an Area Dog (a dog trained to cover large areas, usually wilderness settings looking for human scent) or a Disaster Dog (dogs deployed in catastrophes such as the dogs used in the tragic events of The World Trade Center), the Water Cadaver Dog (dogs used to detect the decomposing scent of a victim searching from a boat to locate and recover the submerged subject.) There are many different disciplines in Search and Rescue and we will go into more detail in future articles, for now I just want to convey the idea of the term discipline and how it relates to the SAR world. Many people associate SAR dogs with either Disaster Dog or Trailing Dogs. There are many different disciplines in Search and Rescue that while similar they are very different in their application.

It is like the Personal Protection dog opposed to the Schutzhund dog. What looks similar to the outsider is very different once you understand the differences.

Many times you will see a dog trained in a single discipline for example a "Live Find Area dog". Other times dogs are trained in multiple disciplines such as "Live Find Area, cross trained in Cadaver Detection." As with anything there are the debates as to what is better. A dog trained in a single discipline, this dog has one purpose, one target or the multi purpose dog that can do many things. Some times though it is mission specific. With the Disaster Dog (DSD) cross training in Cadaver recovery could be considered undesirable because the dog could waste valuable time and resources alerting on cadaver when there is still a high likely hood of recovering survivors. On the other hand an Area Dog being cross trained in Cadaver recovery becomes very desirable as Rescue Missions often become Recovery Missions. Depending on the origination you train with there may be requirements to have multiple disciplines, and then there are originations that prefer the single discipline dog. There are many ways and ideas, and I believe our strength, as with any dog training, lies in our diversity. So even though we may all have different ideas we all have the same mission.



Shirley Hammond with pup Remie working a rubble pile

So we know SAR dogs are trained and certified for a specific discipline. This defines their jobs, and usually how they will perform them. Next we need to look at how disciplines are broken down. A good generalization would be either the "Air Scenting dog" or the "Trailing Dog." Air Scenting dogs make up the majority of SAR dog

disciplines and most dogs trained to detect a target (scent) no matter what the industry; be it narcotics, explosives, or even scat detection (yes there are dogs trained to detect scat in the effort to help study the more elusive or sensitive animals.) The one thing most detection dogs share in common is all of these dogs are looking for the presence of the trained target in the air. These dogs are usually worked off leash and cover an area looking for the target. Depending on the discipline they are trained in will determine the way they work usually either a large area (often times out of the handlers sight) or a very small detailed area such as with a Human Remains Detection Dog (it's not uncommon for this dog to be looking for a bullet in a hay stack!). These dogs work slow and methodical and their noses are usually not very far from the ground. Its detailed work, where with the dog who is looking for live scent may hit a subject over a 100 yards away and they usually cover large areas very quickly. The Air Scenting dog is a common sight. The main deference is in the target they are looking for. When hunting for scent the style of searching will vary depending on what has been determined the most successful way to reach the end goal of finding the target. The Trailing Dog on the other hand works more in a fixed manor. This dog follows scent from point A to point B. Trailing dogs will usually be deployed from a PLS (point last seen) and will follow the scent of that particular person until either they find them or they loose the scent. We consider Air Scenting dogs a bit more free form; it is the handlers' job to make sure they are getting the dog into the right places to detect the presence of the target. Trailing dogs usually have a general starting point and it's the handlers' job to follow and read their dog as it progresses along the Scent Corridor (the path traveled by the subject) to an ending point. Trailing Dogs work similar to the Tracking Dogs most people are accustomed to seeing.

Next we need to explore Scent Specific vs. Non scent specific. This is usually an area of confusion. The Scent specific dog is looking for a particular Scent. These dogs usually are started with a Scent Article (something that contains the scent of the missing person) and are only looking for that particular persons scent. I had some clients that once deployed their Trailing Dog at a County Fair, and it is common for us to train in shopping centers and areas with lots of human scent contamination. The dog must be able to sort threw all of the scent collected in the area and follow only the target identified by the Scent Article. The Non Scent Specific dog is looking for any human scent in the area. This dog would be next to useless in the County fair setting, but really shows its strength when clearing 100s of

acres in the wilderness!

All SAR dogs must have an easily recognizable consistent alert. The alert can be any behavior the dog performs when it has located the target. There are many different types of alerts. The most common being Jumping up on the handler, some people prefer barking at the handler, others use a bringsel (a very small tug toy the dog wears on its neck and grabs when it locates the target) alerts are usually up to the handler to decide. Options for alerts are as varied as the handlers' imaginations. Some originations will have a required alert such as the Disaster Dog that must do a hold and bark at the location of the target. The other

thing we need to think about is how the dog is trained to perform the alert. You have two choices, alert at the target (such as the Disaster Dog doing that hold and bark at the target) or what is called an alert and refind. When the dog finds its target it returns to the handler and offers the trained alert, then the dog must take the handler back to the target. The alert/refind behavior is usually used with dogs that cover large areas (Area Dog)



Java reappears & alerts after finding a subject



Java takes me back to the subject (a refind) after her alert

although this is not always the case. Some trailing dogs will do an alert and refind. Much of it is up to the handler and the team they train with, although it may be discipline specific. Sound confusing? Some Schutzhund people like a hold and Bark, others the sit and stare, some say let the dog choose, other times we need to step in and decide what is best based on Discipline or Team Standards, and other times we have the freedom to choose. The only consistent thing I have found is they all must alert when they have found the target with out prompting from the handler. Many times you may miss your dog hitting the target because you are reading a map, trying to maintain your footing or 10,000 other potential tasks and if your dog has learned to depend on prompting from you, you're going to miss the most important aspect. A friend once told me all dogs know how to search, it's teaching them to tell us consistently when they have found what we are looking for that is the hard part!

Ok, to sum all of this up. SAR Dogs are either "Air Scenting", or "Trailing based". They train to a standard then are tested to certify



A consistent alert is a must for a SAR dog

in a discipline. The discipline describes what they are trained for, and how they are best used by Search Base. When the pager goes off there will be a request for dogs trained in a certain discipline. Just recently when Hurricane Hugo was coming ashore FEMA Task Force 3 got called up. The dogs certified in their discipline "Disaster" were deployed. Due to the nature of the FEMA mission no

Trailing Dogs were requested. Now if we had a lost Alzheimer patient down town then the likely hood of a Trailing Dog call out

would be very high, and there would be no Disaster Dogs requested. The discipline defines what the dog and handler team can and can not do. SAR dogs can be either Scent Specific (looking for a particular person based on a Scent article) or Non Scent Specific (is looking for any



Inca gets scent of a decomposing source hanging in a bush

one) this depends on the discipline and or team standards. All dogs are trained to alert when they find the target they have been trained to locate. How they alert will depend on the discipline, and some times to a degree the handlers' discretion. It is important to do some research and find out what disciplines interest you, there are many options out there. Finding the best fit for you and your dog is vital. Different aspects of SAR work well for different people. Your job is to find what interests you and your dog!

There was a time when I thought nothing could equal the joy and excitement of a nice long bite, or a beautiful commitment to the attack out of the blind. Well let me say when my dog and I are tired, we've been hiking some time in thick unfriendly terrain, and I see her flip her head and take off to a subject a 100 yards or more away. It's as beautiful as any thing I've ever seen. I can only imagine the feeling when it is real and you know you're about to bring someone's loved one home. When you talk to teams that have made live finds their stories are usually followed by tears. It can be quite an emotional experience.



Java vom Fields Hause after passing her first 40 acre test

It often reminds me of Primordial Man. Somewhere on a savanna a primitive man hunts with his dogs. They work as a team to capture food in order to survive for another day. The dogs head flips taking in scent of a game animal. The hunt is on! That evening man and his dog sit by a fire eating together sharing the spoils of the days hunt. SAR is very much like this. It is you and your dog working, flowing together. It is so much more than teaching a collection of set behaviors, it is a very natural thing and that is part of the beauty of it. SAR isn't for every one or every dog as I said before. Even if you may not physically be up to the challenge, or you don't have the right dog there are many ways to become involved. You could always donate to a local SAR origination, you could volunteer to be a subject, or even help with providing training locations to teams. There are many ways to become involved in this Life saving field.

I believe our breed has what it takes; it's just not what you normally think of when you think "Working Rottweilers". I believe my dogs greatest contribution is her ability to think out complicated scent problems.

Rottweilers think and SAR is a great opportunity to use their brains. So when my Schutzhund buddy says "Them Rottweilers think too much, I say exactly, and that's why I love them!" Now that I have a daughter I often think about what if it was her that was lost? Nowadays it is much more about the living and dying opposed to the winning and loosing. Of course there will be competitions and plenty of dog sport, but for me it's more about helping to bring those lost people home. In future articles I look forward to talking in more detail about the different aspects of SAR



A classic head flip - our subject was over 100 yards away

and more precisely how our Rottweilers pertain to the industry of saving lives.



A SAR dog must have an excellent temperament

There are several large SAR originations as well as a multitude of smaller county teams. Check with your local law enforcement branch and they should be able to point you in the

right direction. Just as not every Schutzhund club is the same, so are SAR training groups. You will need to do some research and find the right fit for you and your dog.

SAR Contacts:

NASAR: National Association for Search and Rescue.
<http://www.nasr.org/nasr/>
 Headquarters (707) 222-6277 or toll free (877) 893-0702

FEMA: Federal Emergency Management Agency.
<http://www.fema.gov/>
 1-(800) 621-FEMA (3362)

ARDA: American Rescue Dog Association.
<http://www.ardainc.org/>
 1-(800) 775-8871