

SAR PUPPY PRIMER

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When to start...

"I am training from the time I get them, however I don't start putting pressure on them until they are ready (some males as late as 18 months). I would continue with what I outlined here until pup [female] is at least 10 months, then you can start incorporating into small search patterns (5, 10, 15, 20 acres, etc.). The ladder theory is that for every rung you advance, you have to be willing and recognize the need to back up when you introduce new things (refinds in a rubble pile, start over from initial walk-away and advance from there). Don't need to stay at the primary step, but need to back up so that pup starts/ends successfully."

"[Puppy months] is the time to introduce pup to everything while protecting her from any perceived dangers."
Kim Gilmore

As you may have guessed, I DESPISE run-aways with Belgians (or herding dogs in general for that matter). Instead I do pop-down's/call-outs with my pups which forces them to use ears/noses instead of eyes to search. Run-away's promote prey drive which is eye-searching. We want to get away from that as soon as possible.
Kim Gilmore

STEP ONE:

DURING BOTH STEP 1 AND 2, MAKE SURE VICTIM IS PLACED UPWIND FROM YOU AND THE PUP.

Stock victim with LOTS of SOFT treats, cut up into small pieces (hot dogs, Natural balance roll, etc.). Have victim come up to puppy, pet, talk and tease. Give pup a treat then let pup watch victim CALMLY walk away to about 150' or so. Have victim call out to pup. Give pup search command and when they get into victim, major party where victim rewards (one piece of food at a time) for a minimum of 45 seconds. I do a series of three of these. Each time you do a series (three), change the position of the victim (standing, sitting, laying down, in open, slightly hidden, totally hidden). No more than two series/training day. When pup is performing consistently after 10 training days (so would be 20 series and define consistently at 90%+) then you can proceed to step 2. **EVEN IF YOU ARE BEYOND THIS POINT, IF YOU DO NOT HAVE ENTHUSIASM AND SUCCESS, START OVER.**

EXAMPLES OF BREAKDOWNS:

Pup is stopping mid-way to subject/victim. Break down what has been started and re-format the foundation. If she stops, then have victim whoop it up and call out to her. If she is doing great with victim standing, but hesitates when they are laying down, then back up to where victim doesn't go as far (maybe only 100'), then call's out to her if she stops or balks. If she gets distracted mid-way, victim call's out and MAJOR party when she comes in. **THE VICTIM IS THE TRAINER!!! THE VICTIM BUILDS THE FOUNDATION**

Concurrent training to be done the side

Work on your final response indication (for example, if you want a bump, start teaching her to jump up on you with food reward...DO NOT COMBINE THIS STEP WITH OTHER TRAINING AT THIS TIME! Treat as two separate exercises. You CAN do the bump w/treat every day so that she understands that it is ok for her to jump on you and can incorporate NOT jumping up on your family/friends/teammates, etc. as acceptable (YOU are the only one she can do this to. Word of warning, if you opt for this method, then it is acceptable 100% of the time for her to jump on you...if you discipline, then you are severing the communication between the two of you...she won't understand when it is/isn't acceptable and will have breakdown when needed for final response in SAR as she will be in conflict unless you use a target such as a pack on your front as a target she must hit. This is also the time to build on toy drive if you intend to use a toy reward later.

Choosing an Alert

The alert behavior should be something which is easy and natural for the dog. If your dog is very talkative, a bark alert may work, however the bark alert is not recommended for area search work because often the dog is too winded by the time he/she has found the victim that they can only manage an air bark. But for some dogs it's so natural, they just bark from enthusiasm... good candidates for this alert. If the alert is difficult for the dog, breakdowns in the behavior and failed alerts can begin to be seen towards the more advanced levels of training (like just before you test). Additionally the alert should be something you can easily understand at 3 in the morning in pouring down rain, cold and darkness combined with fatigue... so a sit in front of you may not be the best choice.

AND THE REWARD!!!

STEP 2: ONLY DONE AFTER PUP IS PERFORMING AT 90% OR BETTER ON STEP 1 AND AFTER A MINIMUM OF 20-30 SERIES (repetition builds reliability).

Your pup should now be running into the victim in any position and either in the open or slightly concealed with consistency. At this point we DO NOT let her watch victim walk away. Have victim pet, tease and treat and then turn her around. Victim walks to hiding location, turn pup around (victim can be somewhat concealed) and then have victim call her name THEN sit down/hide behind tree (this is the **pop down**). Let pup loose with search command. If she hesitates, have victim call out again (this is where FRS radios are great). Upon arriving at victim, have victim give her ONE treat, then YOU call her back to you and encourage her to do her bump/alert (have victim radio you when she has arrived at them for timing on the call-back). Reward for action. As soon as you get your final response (DO NOT REWARD FOR ANYTHING LESS THAN WHAT YOU WANT ON THE ALERT...keep encouraging her until you get what you want then treat), have victim call out and once she gets there, MAJOR party with victim rewarding again for at least 45 seconds (one piece of food at a time). Again, no more than two series a training day (three repetitions/series) and at a minimum you want at least 90% after a MINIMUM of 30 series. Victim once again will be in all positions and hidden behind things (but accessible to puppy). If she falters/hesitates, back up to a level where you know she will be successful (the ladder theory...for every rung you climb, back up at least one when introducing a new concept etc.)

DURING BOTH STEP 1 AND 2, MAKE SURE VICTIM IS PLACED UPWIND FROM YOU AND THE PUP.

When performing at a minimum of 90% on step 2, can proceed to step three.

STEP 3: ONLY DONE AFTER PUP IS PERFORMING AT 90% OR BETTER ON STEP 2 AND AFTER A MINIMUM OF 20-30 SERIES (repetition builds reliability).

Hiding puppy, have victim walk out to area where they are planning on hiding UPWIND of you and pup, sit and call out to puppy (this is the call-out). At this point pup realizes that a) there is someone out there that has great treats b) that I must run back to mom and jump up on her to get a second treat and c) must return to victim to get the pez dispenser to activate. Victim is still no more than 150' away, but concealed when they call out to the pup. At this point pup cannot depend on eyes but is learning to use ears/nose. Give her command and let her loose in the direction of the victim. If she hesitates, have victim call out. Again, timing is everything. Once she arrives at victim, treat, call-back, treat for alert, victim call-out to get her to return.

If she prefers treats, you will continue treats during EVERY training from here on out. The only time she gets variable rewarding (aka treats not provided at victim) will be during tests and missions. Once she starts turning on to toys, after pez dispenser reward after refind sequence is completed, then victim can play with her.

Additional Exercises/Games

Reinforcing the indicators of step 2-3 and building independence.

Independence Exercise: To help build victim loyalty and independence from mom.... Victim is 150ft or so from handler. I prefer more open area with vegetation the victim can hide in, but not so much that you can't observe. Can move to more dense area after 90% success. Have victim call out and send your pup. You do not move. You stand in place. Pup gets rewarded for a minimum of 45 seconds with food/play. Then victim runs out of reward and goes non-responsive. Call pup back to you, cue alert, reward, have victim recall pup, 45 seconds of reward, repeat... keep going for 3 finds, recall, refinds. The biggest part of this exercise is that a) handler is not going in with the dog, and b) victim is providing a high level of reward.

Ping Pong (Reinforcing Alert behaviors and refind): Have victim fairly close, 50-100ft. Victim calls out, send pup. One treat on find, then recall pup and cue alert. One treat for alert, then "show me" command. Victim recalls pup and one treat for refind. Handler and victim are stationary. This is just a brief ping-pong exercise. I have used this on victims that Savannah was uncomfortable with and just did ping-pong back and forth to reinforce the alert. I also had victim play with Savannah all the way back to the car. It doesn't happen often but sometimes there are people or incidents that can affect the foundation behaviors, particularly in softer or sensitive dogs.

Building the foundation for the blind search (Only on successful 90% completion of step 3): This exercise helps to move beyond pop-downs and callouts. This requires 3 victims. Victims shall be in place and fairly close - say 150-200'. This is not an area exercise, but a "someone is out there" exercise. Have first victim call out or pop down... send dog. Complete alert, refind, reward (45 seconds). While dog is still enthusiastic, cue for next search. This can mean the second victim calls out, pops down or does nothing. You will vary this. After alert/refind/reward of second victim, repeat for 3rd victim. At first you may have 3 callouts, then have 1 callout, no callout, 1 callout. Later perhaps 1 callout and then 2 blind searches.

I created the "build up" before sending for a blind problem by telling Savannah "Someone's lost" In the beginning I said this with excitement before her search command (which is Go-Find). Now I simply arrive to a search area and get her vest out and she's ready to go. The words are a formality and generally get her leaping into the air. But for awhile the "someone's lost" was the cue that we would in fact be working. The "go find" was the indication that we were now working. One of my teammates uses "help me!" for his excitement phrase.

STEP 4:

Up until now, your problems have all been with the victim upwind and your dog working into the wind. When you have reach both 90% success AND maturity on the part of the dog... i.e. Dog is now both physically and mentally ready for some stressors, which it will have when the victim is not so readily available. Dog also accepts that someone is out there without the aid of a callout. Note however, that along the way if there is any breakdown in enthusiasm, a callout is a good practice to renew and refresh and support the dog, rebuilding confidence. You will see some deflation or stress at the beginning of areas and it is important to refresh and support and praise... callouts, popdowns, etc... don't worry... you'll get to the point where you won't need them, so don't be afraid to use them now.

So you will begin some small area searches. Let's say it is 2-3 acres. Your terrain will be the biggest determinate of area. If your area is highly vegetative and difficult to move through your area will be small, if it is open, it can be considerably bigger. If there is a nice breeze, can be bigger, if no breeze, make it smaller. Now is the time to pay close attention to not only the size of your area searches, but also the nose time. You want to vary your sizes and times, NOT proceed in some linear fashion. One exercise may be 20 minutes, another 40 minutes. These will be on separate days. Each training session in your foundation level will have 3 elements. So you could have an area search, and later after a rest, have a second outing with 3 callouts/popdowns/blind. Will depend on how much the area work took out of the dog, and any strengthening/reinforcing you want to do.

I recommended some reading material to you early on that should have overviewed scent theory and the principle of grid searching. When you come to Portland to train with the team, please give me 48 hrs notice and I will also make a copy of area search principles article from Marcia Koenig, complete with diagrams of search strategies.

Okay, so your first few area searches can be confusing to the dog. It is imperative you know the EXACT location of your victim. If you do not already have a bottle of Breeze Squeeze, Climbers Chalk, Baby Powder, Primos or some other wind checker, you should. You will not be in the scent cone initially and the dog is used to having a pretty immediate scent source to work into. Watch your dog closely. Look for increased enthusiasm, interest in a direction that may only be ears up and looking in that area. Make a mental note of the spot of interest and where the interest runs out. You will teach the dog to be in the scent cone here. When you reach the place where the interest has run out (the outside of the scent cone) turn and grid back across the scent cone. Do this repeatedly while moving in closer to the subject. You will only need to do this exercise 2-3 times, if at all. It is primarily about helping the dog work the scent cone and reinforcing that the dog will move into the scent

A Word about self-rewarding behaviors

It goes without saying the the SAR dog is doing a great community service. Maintaining the fitness, health, interest and training of the SAR dog is not only imperative, it is your duty. So along those lines, it is important to not allow self rewarding behaviors... this means crittering, playing with sticks, etc. If you are hiking regularly with your dog and finding the dog is crittering, then you are encouraging a self rewarding behavior in the dog's "office". Consider that... if your dog is prone to critter, find focused activities to replace that. Perhaps when you hike or exercise outside of SAR training, you involve a toy instead of allowing those behaviors. The danger in these behaviors is that unless the dog is highly motivated on a search, a frustrated dog will start looking to those self rewarding behaviors instead of continueing to work. It's hard enough on the SAR dog to be out there in the heat for 3-4 hours with no scent to spark and interest... having to then deal with these behaviors can really stop your progress. Personally my dog hikes rarely - she hiked a lot early on because she wasn't confident in brush, so I hiked with confident dogs to help her learn about the terrain. One of my dogs is handler focused and is fine for hiking - will focus on me or a toy. Two of the others will critter, chase wildlife. Were those two airscent dogs, they would never hike... the woods would be their office and nothing more.

A Word about equipment

There are differing opinions and preferences as to equipment on the airscent dog. On the one hand, a harness or vest identifies your dog and provides visibility and a place to attach a light stick and bear bell. On the other hand, harness and vests can become traps in dense brush. You will have to decide for yourself. I use a breakaway collar with glow lights on it, that velcro on at night. I carry a leash and collar during the day. I don't like the Aroua Collar that is so popular with people - a) the vendor has not provided product to a number of colleagues despite payment b) they are heavy for my little 40lb Terv and c) I will only use a very lose collar or breakaway collar so if my dog gets hung up they can escape... the Aurora is too expensive to have lost on a branch. So I've begun using another thing to help with visibility. It is an elastic slip on collar that is Hi-vis yellow with reflective silver, like firemen suit. It's brighter than a glow collar. I do have a vest, such as the kind used by Flathead County SAR. It velcros on and I keep it lose so it can be slipped out of. It has a tie and elastic strip for attaching a glow stick at night. Some people use bear bells or yak bells on their dogs. Most handlers in Oregon do use bells. Some handlers put the bells on themselves instead of the dogs, to help the dog hear them. They reason that the dog can better hear a potential victim if they do not have bells ringing in their ears. I have done both. I will use the bells often at night, but really my dog does not expect them one way or the other.

A Word about breaks

When doing an area search, expect to stop for a 1-5 min break every 20-30 min or so. Use an alarm on your watch if you have to. Your dog may be willing to work non-stop, however you will be able to work longer if you force a break. On your break, sit down, take your pack off, make your dog sit or down. In hot weather you may need to break every 10 minutes... do it. In Summer I carry a cool mat (gel) and I put a Chilly Buddy blanket on the dog during work. Watch your dog also for any foot issues. If the ground in your area bakes hot in the Summer, consider Musher's boots or some other boot for your dog, if your dog seems to be affected by it.

cone. If there is any hesitancy with going to the subject back up to step 3 and also see "Additional Exercises/Games" for some independence exercises.

Once your dog is enthusiastically beginning and working these area problems, you can start to work with strategies like victims on ridges, victims upriver, scent pools, etc. Any time you see stress or anxiety, work to build the dogs enthusiasm. Never ever be afraid to change your plan and make a problem shorter by having a victim move closer, callout or cut your area short. However it is best to not walk the dog into a victim. I've only done this twice and it was when there was bear smell around and have to say dog must be smart. Dog found victim but was afraid to leave me. We knew there were bears because they'd been seen that morning. So dog stayed with me, however I reinforce foundation behaviors with the Ping Pong game.

Also sometimes you might find your dog doesn't alert if you are really close to the victim on the re-find/find. Cue the alert so that you have the behaviors 100% of the time. Don't let dog decide that "well you can see her can't you mom!"

We train in our area every Saturday, and often in the Larch Mountain area, so do let us know when you'd like to come this way. Can also schedule to come your way for a weekend training sometime.