



## **NOSE WORK GAMES**

### **Introduction to K9 Nose Work**

#### **I. BEFORE YOU START**

##### **Tools**

- The Boxes

They are typically cardboard boxes. They do not need to be covered, nor do they all need match in size, color or shape to start the game. Experiment with other types of containers if you don't have boxes available. Go to your local recycle center. If boxes are too tall for small dogs, get smaller, lower profile boxes, or turn them sideways. You don't want the boxes sealed. They should be vented so that the dog catches scent easily. Begin the game with completely open boxes and then progress to partially closing the flaps, or using boxes with lids that have holes punched in them.

- Bait bag or container for treats (or some type of vented container, like a margarine tub with holes punched in it)

*This is an option, but not necessary. Loose food in the box is okay too. If you are teaching a class however, where a larger variety of treats are used, it may be easier to contain the treats in order to avoid food spilling or leaking everywhere. See what works well for the dog.*

##### **Search Environment**

- Enclosed, safe area; ideally indoors at first
- Minimize distractions
- If outdoors is the only option, stay away from grass and dirt surfaces and try to find hard surfaces with few distractions.

##### **Set-up**

- Pattern of boxes: It doesn't matter! Scatter the boxes, work them in a line, a circle...have fun, experiment.
- On or off leash: Evaluate safety for dog and safety for observers first
  - Do as much off leash as possible – you will learn more about how the dog works scent, and the dog will search with less inhibition
  - When/why to go ON-leash
    - a. Safety
    - b. Controlling the environment. For example, if the dog is too distracted and fixated on other smells, you may decide to go on-leash to limit access (control the environment) to surrounding area.
    - c. Practicing leash work – do this once you have an understanding of how the dog works freely. The goal should be to shadow the dog so that he is able to work as if no leash were inhibiting him. DON'T use the leash to steer the dog.
- Loose food or bait bag? Again, it doesn't matter. Experiment. If you use a bait bag, add some loose food on top so the dog can always self-reward in the beginning.
- The reward box: Remember we often use one dedicated box for the reward (marked with an "X" or "Food"). The handler should always know where the source is so that they can develop better observation skills for when the dog is 'in odor' and approaching the source. It's good practice to work one box so that when odor is introduced later in the game, the handler already has good habits of using one dedicated box.

• You can also work more freely however and develop interest in the boxes by using multiple reward boxes at first, or putting food outside of, but near the boxes. Here's the motto to keep in mind every time you wonder whether you should try something: "IT DEPENDS ON THE DOG." Be creative, have some fun. Consider the age of dog, confidence level, and motivation in determining your approach.

Note: If you have a toy-reward dog, you can also use a dedicated "TOY" box. Be sure to remove the "FOOD" reward box from the search area while you are working a dog that has toy rewards.

• **MOST IMPORTANT:** The dog should self-reward, even if you come in to help deliver additional rewards.

• **Safety if you are working with other dogs:** Set-up logistics for safe, entrances and exits for dogs. Keep dogs crated in between runs. NO loose or leashed dogs in the same room as the search. One dog at a time rule. No doggie socializing rule. Please keep this sport accessible to dog-reactive and environmentally sensitive dogs. If you make safety a priority, this sport will be possible for many more dogs and their handlers.

## II. GETTING STARTED

### Motivation

• Evaluating the reward: Find something powerful enough to over ride the environment. This will be easier in the dog's familiar environment.

-Food Rewards: We've had the best luck with soft and stinky treats and tend to avoid crumbly/crunchie cookie-type treats. Examples of food rewards we've found powerful: Salmon, blue cheese, rotisserie chicken, ham hocks, chicken gizzards, sausages, mackerel, sardines, liverwurst.

-Toy Rewards: The dog should be REALLY toy motivated, enough so that it would choose to retrieve a toy or tug over an average food reward. If a dog stops playing with his toy to investigate the food smells left from other dog's treats, the toy is not likely powerful enough in that environment.

Stick with either food or toy in the beginning once you've discovered which is more powerful. Eventually when the dog is on odor, you might be able to vary which reward is used. The search itself becomes a powerful motivator once dog has caught on to the game.

### Training on your own (no helper)

• Work freely with the dog and play the game while the dog runs loose. Choose a low distraction, safe, secure and preferably familiar environment. Try the shell game, or toss treats in various boxes to get the game going and buy you time to get that food box hidden. Have a contest with the dog – try to beat the dog in the hiding game so that he is captivated. You both should be having fun!

• Crate the dog, or put behind a gate, and pre-load the food/toy box. The dog that has played the game enough will already recognize the boxes as a cue.

• When the dog has found the source, always take the source away from the dog. Don't pull the dog off source. This will be even more important once working with odor.

### Team Training (working with a helper)

Goals of helper:

1. Keep the dog focused on you.
2. Keep the engagement short and sweet. If the dog turns away, you may have carried on too long.
3. Move around at the speed that engages the dog.
  - a. Use your knowledge of breed types in determining how to play/engage the dog in the game
4. Let the handler know when to release the dog – either tell them, or use the universal empty hands signal.
5. Try not to make the food/toy box the last the last box you stop at before having the handler release the dog, or you'll direct the dog right to the box. Try to fake the dog out.
6. Once the dog is searching, relax – either be still or move around normally through the search area.
7. When should you move or attract the dog either verbally or with movement?
  - a. If the dog is actively searching – do nothing, be patient and let them problem solve. Even if they momentarily leave the area, you do not have to attract them back right away. Give them space to explore and think.

- b. If the dog gets overly focused on something else, attract the dog back to the search area by making a subtle noise, or showing some curiosity in a box or two in the search area (not the target box). Try to refrain from calling the dog's name, or using any recall command. (We may have done this in the workshop for the purpose of expediency, but we'd prefer not to in most practice sessions.)
  - c. If the dog gets overly focused in one area of the search zone, walk to a different area. You don't need to keep moving around. Every change changes the environment. Wait and see what happens first.
8. How to change the environment:
- a. Change your position within the search area. Try moving to the opposite side from where you are.
  - b. Toss a box towards an area that the dog has not searched.
  - c. Add an object (chair, table, box) near the source that may help create a pool of scent.

*REMEMBER: Your job as handler or helper (in the beginning).*

***The helper watches the dog***

***The handler watches the helper***

*Eventually the handler will be watching the dog for the moment when he's focused towards the search. In the beginning, when working with a helper, you can take your cue from the helper as to when to release the dog. The helper on the other hand should always be engaged with the dog. The helper can still talk to, and direct the handler, but eyes should be on the dog.*

Goals of handler:

1. Be **neutral**: Don't talk, don't pet the dog, and relax.  
(If anyone talks, it should be the helper. We don't want the dog's attention to be on its handler – as the dog will naturally orient to his handler's voice.)
2. Watch for the moment when the helper needs you to release the dog.
3. Don't release the dog if the dog is not interested in the search area. Wait for the moment when the dog is focused on the search area or the helper's actions.
4. Once the dog is released, you can stay in place or move around, depending on the situation
5. When should you move?
  - a. If the dog is willing to move away and search, there's no reason to move.
  - b. If the dog gets overly focused on you, walk to a different area, break eye contact, don't get lead footed and frozen. You don't need to keep moving around but perhaps move a little or turn away slightly.
  - c. If at all possible, do not stop near the food/toy box. It is important the dog doesn't learn to key on you for help in locating the box.
6. When the dog has found the source, always take the source away from the dog. Don't pull the dog off source. This will be even more important once working with odor.

### **III. TRAINING REMINDERS**

**Have a Plan B:** When you set out a hide, especially once you progress outside of the boxes, have a training plan in mind for what you are going to do if the dog struggles too long. How will you change the environment? Are boxes available?

**Reward at the source** (in the box)!!! Get good habits now. Once you get to the point of training the dog on odor, more accuracy on the part of the handler is required. If you practice always rewarding at the source, you'll be trained. Remember: Party in the box! Get your dog's tag wagging and have fun! Also if you have a toy/tug reward dog, tug right at the box.

**Blind Hides:** Hides are always blind to the dog. Handlers are often enthusiastic about testing themselves on blind hides. We recommend you wait to do blind hides until you've had much practice reading your dog's behavior when you do know where the hide is. Once you are ready for blind hides, be sure you practice with a trained instructor or helper. With an inexperienced helper, you could set your dog up for a tough search situation with no safety net.

**No Obedience Zone:** Have fun. Control the environment, not the dog.

**Be positive and motivational:** Nose Work is supposed to be rewarding and fun for the dog. We don't use verbal or physical corrections in Nose Work.

### **Why aren't markers (such as a clicker) used in the beginning phases of Nose Work?**

1. Use the right tool for the right job. A marker (or clicker) is a precise distinct sound that works beautifully when teaching distinct behaviors. It's unnecessary in this application.
2. What are you clicking? Head in a box, targeting a treat pouch, head turn towards the odor? Searching/hunting is NOT a targeting exercise.
3. What usually happens when a dog hears a click? Looks at you, not the reward. Also, the search now involves you and the dog is looking to please you. The dog that self-rewards doesn't need any feedback from you that he is correct. He knows the moment he is at source. Why mess with Mother Nature? The dog's ability to hunt and locate the source is already there.
4. No previous skills required. This sport is about having FUN, and making it available to all types of dogs and handlers. The fewer tools required, the more accessible it is.

### **Why delay teaching a final response?**

1. The final response is a decision on the part of the dog that he is at source, or as close to source as he can get. To build reliability in the dog making this decision for himself, we delay teaching a final response.
2. Many of the dogs that do K9 Nose Work have many other disciplines...obedience is an especially common one. We want the dog to stay focused on hunting in the beginning and not switch the mindset to obedience. You don't want the dog guessing if he's correct as the searches become more difficult and he gets frustrated, tired, or anticipates the reward. By building the game on self-reward and strong hunting skills, the dog will be very reliable in making a decision.
3. It's also important to learn to read the dog's change in behavior as he nears or approaches source. This is the true alerting behavior. This will help you in reading the dog better when searches are blind to the handler.

### **Rules to Live By:**

- Watch your dog
- Control the environment, not the dog
- Build a strong hunting foundation
- Trust your dog
- Have FUN!

## **IV. PROGRESSING FORWARD**

### **ODOR – Phase 2**

#### **Why wait to introduce odor?**

In the second phase, the dog is taught to search for a unique odor rather than food. This idea is very exciting to many who are new to this type of work. There is a natural tendency to want to rush to this step. This is most often a mistake. The dog should learn to search in all kinds of environments for his primary reward, building strength in the search and having fun all the while. When odor is finally introduced, the dog has confidence in searching and will have the endurance and desire to problem-solve because the hunting skill will have been built previously. If it is rushed, and odor is introduced too early, you risk the dog looking to you for help when frustrated. You can easily create many training problems that will affect search work later.

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